August 4, 2019 Susan Cooke Kittredge

Exodus 3:1-6 Charlotte Congregational Church, UCC

Luke 22:19-20

*Counter Dracula*

Both of the passages that Abbie read are unnerving if we let ourselves really think about them. The one from Exodus doesn’t make a lot of sense if you examine it at all closely. First, there’s a bush on fire that isn’t being consumed by the flames. We had a big bonfire at our house last weekend and in an hour two years’ worth of brush and trees were gone in a scorching blaze of orange. Second, Moses does this weird turning away in order to see something directly in front of him; I get twisted like a pretzel trying to imagine the scene physically and theologically. Third, God tells him to take off his shoes for the place on which he is standing is holy ground. Tess, our dog, dared not venture close to the fire on Saturday because sparks were landing willy nilly. She lifted her paws carefully and retreated. But God tells Moses to feel the heat and the sparks. It’s an alarming command. Take your shoes off, this is holy ground, and yes, it’s risky. The injunction is to experience the tactile reality of the earth, to feel the soil beneath his feet. It also infers a gesture of respect. When entering a holy place shoes or sandals were traditionally removed at the entrance.

We know that in Mosques and Buddhist temples across the world, shoes are not permitted in sanctuaries; worshippers must leave their shoes at the door. In this particular passage, it seems that God is encouraging Moses to feel the heat, to risk the danger of getting burned for the intimate sensation of the feeling the earth. There’s also a humble recognition that God is present in the very ground beneath his feet, that the earth is holy ground.

The second selection from Luke tells of the institution of the Lord’s Supper, communion. On the first Sunday of every month we celebrate communion. Catholic, Episcopal and Lutheran congregations serve communion, which they call, variably the “Eucharist,” “The Lord’s Supper,” “Holy Communion,” every time they gather for worship.

Have you ever been perplexed by this sacrament? In our tradition, we have only two sacraments. The Catholics have seven. A lot of emphasis is placed on our two, communion and baptism. And yet, communion can be confusing and odd. Jesus says, “This is my body, given for you.” Clearly that’s a bit too graphic for us Protestants. When we serve communion we generally, soften the language and say, “Bread of life” or “Bread of Peace” which is infinitely more palpable apparently than saying, “Body of Christ.” Body of Christ sounds, well, almost cannibalistic; you don’t have to be a vegetarian or vegan to recoil a bit at this description. Then Jesus lifted the chalice and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” It’s kind of scary and yucky, to be honest, and the idea of drinking blood reminds us of Dracula and the current pop culture fascination with Vampires. The Lord’s supper has what Richard Rohr calls “a stun-gun” sense to it. We are supposed to be shocked by this. Jesus knew exactly what he was saying. Who are we to suggest that he didn’t really mean that the bread was his body and the wine, his blood?

When we engage with what is to me a new way of seeing Christ as God revealed, God incarnated in all creation, not just in Jesus in a moment in history, then seeing the bread and the juice as Christ makes perfect sense to me. Remember, Christ means “anointed,” so God’s love is made real and tangible to us in the creation itself, which we know is a gift. Our little planet, a tiny speck in all creation and time, is filled with God revealed; it is anointed, christed if we can invent a word, or more familiarly “christened.” Surely grapes and wheat—and in our gluten free bread—rice and potatoes are part of the wonder of creation. So as we accept the bread and the juice we are accepting, in all humility and gratitude the gift of Christ, God’s wild and crazy love made tangible and real for us in simple things like grain, vegetables and fruit, in the very food we eat and drink. It turns out that we are what we eat, after all. We are each of us, filled with Christ, not just at this communion table but wherever we engage with the created universe, which is, of course, always.

The novelist Flannery O’Connor tells a story of having been invited, when she was in her 20s, to dinner with the writer Mary McCarthy and her husband.

“I was once, five or six years ago, taken by some friends to have dinner with Mary McCarthy and her husband, Mr. Broadwater. . . She departed the Church at the age of 15 and is a Big Intellectual. We went at eight and at one, I hadn’t opened my mouth once, there being nothing for me in such company to say. . .. Having me there was like having a dog present who had been trained to say a few words but overcome with inadequacy had forgotten them. Well, toward morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mrs. Broadwater said when she was a child and received the host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the most portable person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it.

That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable.” (The Habit of Being)

It’s only been in the last year that I have quite joyously set aside the notion that the bread and juice are symbols. For me the acceptance of the bread and the juice is an affirmation of the blessedness of creation as revealed in this Christ soaked world, God’s love exemplified in Jesus and present always in the messiness, deep suffering and redemptive radiance of our earthly lives.

What is different about this sacramental moment when we come forward to receive is that we pause in our busyness; we set this time apart to acknowledge its holiness. We affirm that we are standing on holy ground. It’s a wonder that like Moses we’re not told to take our shoes off and feel the ground beneath our feet.

I’m reminded of elephants and their amazing ability to hear through their feet. They can communicate in low resonance vocalizations that travel for miles and the sound is received through the feet of other elephants.

When Lawrence Anthony, the South African elephant researcher died, his beloved elephants traveled twelve miles to his home. A couple of days after his death, two matriarch elephants arrived at his house, followed by droves of elephants from separate herds. In all 31 elephants made the trek to stand in honor of their friend. They somehow knew precisely when he had died. “A good man died suddenly,” noted Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, Ph.D., “and from miles and miles away, two herds of elephants, sensing that they had lost a beloved human friend, moved in a solemn, almost ‘funereal’ procession to make a call on the bereaved family at

the deceased man’s home.” This man’s oh-so-abundantly loving heart offered healing to these elephants, and now, they came to pay loving homage to their friend.”

We are invited, I think, as we come forward to accept the gift of Christ and to feel and sense both the suffering and infused love in our world.

Can you hear through your feet the cries of children at the border? And their parents beating their chests in desperation miles and miles away?

Can you sense the fear and frustration as Ebola spreads in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda where nearly 2,000 people have died and medical workers are killed?

As farmers in the Midwest gave up planting after the horrendous floods of early summer, can you hear them plinking their pennies in despair?

Can you feel through your body the hope of new life, revealed in babies and small children, fawns and puppies?

Can you feel your body relax at the wild and welcome notion that you are forgiven?

Here in this sanctuary in this glorious corner of the world where the water is pure and crops thrive, where for the most part money is adequate and …. Are neighbors and friends struggling with depression, addiction, broken hearts and aching bodies. Plant your feet on the floor and listen, listen to the one beside you who is offering love, the one beside you who feels through their feet, your heart song.

This is my body, Jesus says, given for you. This cup is poured out for you.

For you. For you. Can you feel God reaching out to love and embrace you?

This is Holy Ground.

Grace and Peace.