[**Proverbs 9:1-6**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=215#hebrew_oth_reading)

[**Psalm 34:9-14**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=215#psalm_oth_reading)

[**Ephesians 5:15-20**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=215#epistle_reading)

[**John 6:51-58**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=215#gospel_reading)

PLUGGING LEAKS Sermon for August 19

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

I'm sure many here will remember the Afflack commercial from a few years back where the Afflack duck is in a little rowboat that starts springing leaks, and the duck sticks one webbed foot in one leak, then a finger in another, then a wing in another, and so on until he finally only has his beak left and he uses that. Not a particularly funny or clever commercial, but it seems apt to describe how sometimes an enterprise that starts out to be promising suddenly starts developing problems and each one of them has to be dealt with to keep the whole thing going. It happens to business, it happens to laws, it happens to marriages, it happens to football teams, the list could go on and on. And yes, it happens to religion.

We've mentioned before that the gospel of John was the last written of the four gospels, and that it was in part at least written in order to resist certain tendencies of thought and worship that were starting to corrupt the true message of the gospel and the true meaning of who Jesus was and what His life and death accomplished.

The letters of Paul, most of them written to particular churches, shared that same concern. To stick with our image, early Christianity – especially the first sixty or seventy years, could be compared to a small boat trying to navigate a rough ocean, constantly springing leaks that, if left unplugged, would have let the surrounding water in and almost certainly have sunk the boat.

Similarly Paul and later John were like the boat carpenters constantly at work dealing with leaks in the very frail barky of early Christianity. And I think it’s safe to say that without their efforts, the young movement called the Way would either have sunk back into the Judaism from which it emerged, or been submerged under the influences of the many surrounding pagan varieties of religion.

The letter to the Ephesian church contains several examples, for example in the selection we read this morning. We know from many sources that intoxication was a common element of the worship service of many of the pagan cults of the Graeco-Roman parts of the world in which Paul was conducting his ministry. The Greeks even had a god of drunkenness named Dionysius.

And it's important to remember that, during this era, nearly all adult Christians were converts from some pagan religion. These were literally the first generation of Christians. And quite evidently, at least some of these converts to Christianity in Ephesus were seeking to incorporate this element of their old religion into their new one. The situation was no doubt very much like the one Paul was inveighing against in chapter 11 of his first letter to the Corinthians, where he admonishes them for getting drunk on the communion wine. These Corinthians weren't being sacrilegious, they were simply accustomed to getting drunk as part of their religious ceremony, and were bringing that old custom into their new church.

And something like that must have been happening here in Ephesus, too, and the little ship of new Christian believers there was springing a leak that Paul knew had to be plugged before the ship was swamped by it.

And now turning to our reading from the Gospel of John, I think we see something similar at work.

We pointed out a while back that one of the issues confronting John was that people were starting to think of Jesus as sort of a heavenly version of a human king, when in fact John believed that Jesus had come to redefine what it meant to be a king, that Jesus was not someone who ruled from the sky as king of kings, but rather was someone who ruled in our hearts as servant of all.

And we began our discussion of that topic by taking note of the fact that the Gospel of John is the only Gospel that mentions the fact that Jesus fled from the crowd after the feeding of the multitude in order not to be crowned king by them.

Just so this morning, let's begin by noticing something else that's very distinctive about the Gospel of John. In the other three gospels, the most important thing that happens during the Last Supper, on Christ's last night on earth, the most important thing that happens, far and away, is what? Jesus breaks the bread and shares it, pours the wine and passes it around. In other words, he institutes the sacramental practice we call Communion, the practice this church along with every other church in Christendom recreates on a regular basis. Some do it monthly like we do, some do it weekly, some do it daily like the Catholics. But we all do it. Every single church. It is undeniably the single most important sacrament of Christian worship, and it's not even close.

And yet, read through chapters thirteen and fourteen of John's gospel, the chapters which describe Jesus' final meal with his disciples, and what do you not find? You do not find even a single mention of the bread or the wine. The only practice that might be considered sacramental that John mentions is Jesus washing the feet of His disciples.

And isn't that really remarkable when you think about it? From the letters of Paul, written decades before the Gospel of John, we know that the bread and the wine had become the central element of Christian worship. And from other early Christian authors writing not long after John, we know the practice had only become more entrenched, as it continues to be down to today.

And yet the Gospel of John doesn't mention it, in fact, obviously chooses deliberately not to mention it.

Why?

And the question becomes even more puzzling when we notice also that the gospel of John, to a far greater degree than any of the other three gospels, dwells on the thought that Jesus Himself is the bread on which we are to feed. The 6th chapter of John from which our Gospel readings have come this entire past month begins with the multiplication of the loaves of bread and the fish, and then builds through a magnificent discourse on the true bread from heaven, and concludes with the verses that comprise our gospel reading for this morning. So let's read them together.

Read John 6:51-58.

So John recreates Jesus speaking at great length of Himself in terms of the true bread, the bread from heaven, the bread that gives eternal life, and yet omits altogether any mention of the institution of Eucharist, the sacred sacrament of communion. What's going on here?

I think it's the same dynamic we discussed before in John. I believe a tendency had begun to emerge in the young Christian church that John perceived as a threat to its very existence. It was the tendency to think of the Communion as a kind of magical cure, to think of the wine as a heavenly elixir for the soul and the bread a potent medicine for the body. People were beginning to ignore the meaning of the sacrament and instead focusing on its power.

And I would suggest that explains why John omits all mention of it from his record of the Last Supper, and yet spends such an inordinate amount of time having Jesus discuss the spiritual meaning of the image of His own body as bread: he is de-emphasizing the literal and reemphasizing the spiritual. He is resisting the tendency to regard the Communion, and by implication, all of Christ's gift to us, as basically tools or instruments for accomplishing our own goals and fulfilling our own desires, rather than as a Way for coming into intimate relationship, into communion, with God.

It's interesting in this context to look again at John's account of the last supper and see what he describes instead of the Communion. The washing of the disciple's feet is the perfect example of something that could not possibly be construed as serving one's own interest, the perfect example of someone humbling and lowering himself entirely to serve others.

Why does this matter for us today?

I think for a couple of reasons. The first and most straightforward one is that there has always been and continues to be important and influential elements in the church that do in fact look on the physical act of communion in the way John is warning against, that look on the physical elements of the actual bread and the actual juice as having power in themselves, so long as certain words have been pronounced over them by someone, usually by someone with special credentials. There are churches where communion is taught to be effective against cancer, or an important tool for marital or financial success. The bread literally heals the body, and the wine literally cleanses the soul.

But more importantly, I think this way of regarding communion feeds a tendency that, when it is full-blown, leads us fundamentally astray in our thinking about and attitude towards God and Jesus.

Put bluntly, it is the tendency, first described in the Garden of Eden, to see myself as the center of the universe, and everything else, God included, as revolving around me. Religion becomes one tool in the arsenal by which I accomplish my own goals, achieve my own ends. Prayer becomes an opportunity to state my desires, my hunger for guidance becomes an exercise in rationalizing what I've already decided anyway, and my own fundamental goodness becomes the rock on which I construct the rest of my self-image.

But all of that runs against everything Jesus taught. “Without me, you can do nothing,” he says. “Eat of me,” he says. “I am the life,” he says.

Christ does not offer to satisfy my desires, but to give me new desires. He does not offer to empower me, he offers to humble me. He does not offer to fix me, he offers to replace me, to put a new life within me, a life with a new lineage, a new inheritance, a new family tree, a life with God's own spiritual DNA.

And so, gracious God, our sermon prayer this morning is that you make it clear to our hearts that, although Jesus did most certainly come to serve us, He did so to provide us with the model of how we should serve others. Keep us aware of the true meaning of the bread that Jesus used to symbolize Himself, that it nourishes us in order that we may nourish others. When we are told to remember the death of Jesus whenever we eat the bread and take the wine, help us remember that His death offers a new birth for each of us, a new life modeling the life Jesus Himself lived, and we offer this prayer in His name.