

Thursday, September 3, 2020

The sign of the fish

- Pastor Hank French

I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more (Luke 12:4).

Let me tell you a story about a friend of mine from my days in Japan. It was 1943 and my friend, a Minnesota woman named Judy, spent that year in a Japanese concentration camp in the Philippines along with other missionaries who had also been captured by the Japanese.

The concentration camp was not a nice place. There was never enough to eat. Dinky barracks to sleep in. Constant surveillance by armed guards. Constant fear and anxiety. There were frequent deaths among the prisoners as people got sick and died for lack of adequate medicines. What medicine there was had to be surreptitiously bartered for from the few guards who could be bribed with what few personal possessions the missionaries had left. It was a dangerous business.

It wasn't only medicines that the missionaries traded for. They traded also for a bottle of wine. You see, Holy Communion was very important to them. In this hell on earth, the bread and wine of Christ's presence was a deep source of hope and comfort for these imprisoned Christians. The bottle of wine was always well-hidden. If it were found, it would be confiscated. If it were found in someone's possession, he or she could be killed. To those people of faith, it was a risk worth taking.

One night, a small group of missionaries gathered in the darkness of their barracks. Before them sat the precious bottle of wine and a small rice cracker. One of the group picked it up, blessed and broke it, whispering, "This is the body of Christ, broken for you," and gave each person a small piece of the cracker. As he reached for the bottle of wine, there was a whispered, urgent cry from one of the missionaries watching the prison yard from the barracks' window. A squad of Japanese soldiers was approaching the building. There was no time to hide the bottle of wine in its usual hiding place.

Judy quickly jammed the cork in the mouth of the bottle and slipped it hurriedly beneath the bedding on her sleeping cot. The missionaries gathered in a circle, held hands, and waited. The soldiers entered the barracks. They were surprised to see the missionaries out of bed, seated on the floor in the dark. One soldier who spoke a little English, demanded to know what they were doing.

"Oinori." said one of the missionaries—the Japanese word for prayer. That was OK. The missionaries had not been forbidden to pray. But this prayer meeting was over. The soldiers told them to get up and stand by their sleeping cots. The soldiers were looking for bartered items.

Judy's heart sank. The bottle of wine was in her bed. It would be found. She would be punished, if not killed. She prayed as a soldier approached her cot. He reached for the bedding on her cot and saw her flinch. He pulled back the bedding and saw the cork on the bottle of wine. Surprisingly, he pulled the bedding back over the bottle and then bent over to look under the cot. As he did so, he drew a small symbol of a fish in the dust on the floor, saw that she saw it, and then erased it with his boot as he got back to his feet. Without another glance at Judy he moved on to the next bed.

The inspection was over; nothing was found. The soldier had been a Christian. The fish symbol he drew in the dust told it all. For millennia, Christians have used the symbol of a fish to secretly identify themselves to other Christians in times of persecution and danger. The soldier knew what the wine was for. He too was someone for whom the bread and wine of Christ's presence was worth taking risks for, and so he protected the life of this young woman at the risk of his own.

Prayer: Thank you Lord for meeting us, encouraging us, bringing us hope in bread and wine. Amen.

The bread and wine of Christ's presence has been the mainstay of people of faith for 2000 years. On Sunday, September 20th from 9:00 to 10:30 and on Wednesday, September 23rd from 6:30 to 7:30 in the evening, we will hold another parking lot drive thru distribution of bread and wine for you to celebrate Holy Communion in the safety of your home. "May the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen you and keep you in God's grace."