

How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing?

Eating and drinking certainly do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: “given for you” and “shed for you for the forgiveness of sin.” These words, when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes in these very words has what they declare and state, namely, “forgiveness of sin.”

Last spring I took a slow hike with an old friend (Michael Kohn) into the gorge just below lower Whitewater Falls in upstate SC. The trees were coming alive—massive oaks, stately spruce. Bluets and wild iris just beginning to poke through the early spring soil. And all the water rushing through the narrow canyon; clear pools in the river, 8-10 feet deep in spots.

It’s always good to be reminded of a natural order that keeps humming along without our notice or assistance; a seasonal rhythm set in place by a gracious and inventive hand. A huge oak served as a temporary backrest. I read somewhere that adult trees of this size, in summer, sponge-up *a ton of water* every day from the earth. One could almost hear this ancient granddaddy slurping a long, slow sip.

Down through the centuries of Christian history, the cross of Christ came to be known as “a tree.” Several times in the book of Acts, Luke doesn’t use the common word “cross,” but instead says something like, “They put him to death by hanging him on a tree” (10:39) or, “They took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb” (13:29).

So Clarence Jordan, in his “Cottonpatch Gospels,” must have had this image in mind, in addition to a civil rights statement, when he refers to Jesus’ crucifixion as a “lynching.” In our country still quite new, I wonder if those who thought they could squelch a movement with violence knew that their chosen vehicle of death was actually connected to a very old and powerful metaphor, rooted in a truth exceeding any earthly power—the cross as *tree*. Saint Peter’s correspondence puts it most graphically: “Christ carries up our sins in his body *to the tree*, so that we might live” (1 Peter 2:24).

In early Christian tradition, the cross was understood to be planted *in the exact same place* where the Tree of Life once grew in the Garden of Eden. This tree will now have a new garden growing outward from its roots of grace. There is a great and mysterious paradox at work here. Jesus gives his life on a tree, but this tree in turn gives life to others.

In early spring on Whitetop Mountain in Virginia (near where I used to live), residents bore into the maple trees and out flows the sweet sap. In John’s version of our Lord’s passion, while Jesus hangs there, breathing his last, soldiers pierce his side with a spear. Out gushes blood. And water. Humanity pierces the side of Jesus, bores into the tree of life, and out flows the sweet sacramental love of chalice and font. Even in death, Jesus nourishes the world.

This tree and this flowing inform a powerful vision of the Bible's final chapter. You've heard it: "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is *the tree of life*...and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:1-2).

The leaves of the tree. And who are they? The leaves of the tree are surely God's people, rooted in the love of the cross, growing for the sake of the world. We are born in Christ for such healing.

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There is an old, ancient tree on a hill just outside Jerusalem—much older and bigger than the massive oak I leaned against in Whitewater River Gorge. On it hangs a man, in silence, with arms outstretched—old rings of love inside the tree revealing the height and width and depth of the tree's reach.

Sometimes, around dusk, I like to look back over the day, back over my life and its many mistakes, and see the long branches of this tree silhouetted against the evening's last light.

From a distance, the tree looks like it could hold the whole world in its sturdy boughs. Here's the good news...

It can.