

**Pentecost 6 \*\*\* Proper 5 \*\*\* Year A \*\*\* 9 July 2023**

Journalist Erin Blakemore sets the scene for us:

“Mary Todd Lincoln paced the parlor alone. Hours before, she had witnessed the point-blank assassination of her husband Abraham Lincoln at the nearby Ford’s Theatre; now, she had been banished from the president’s bedside by a furious Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who kicked her out of the room when she began to cry hysterically. Nearby, her husband was dying—but his wife of 23 years wouldn’t be there to see it...

Today, we might see her erratic behavior as evidence of her possible bipolar disorder or as a sign of the trauma and loneliness she experienced during the chaotic days following her husband’s murder... But at the time, Mary’s behavior was seen as evidence that she was an improper woman... [She] had always had a hard time meeting the severe expectations for women of her era. Women, even famous wives, were expected to focus on the home and not seek attention or appear in public, but Mary loved the spotlight and had a knack for publicity.

Mary’s reaction to her husband’s death was scandalous. Though the era was known for its lavish displays of mourning, social custom also dictated that upper class women suppress their emotions in public. But Mary, who had also lost two of her sons in childhood (and would lose a third just years later) showed no restraint in her grief. Soon after Lincoln’s death, Washington was filled with rumors of the scenes Mrs. Lincoln was making within the White House. She terrified onlookers with her expressions of pain.

Later, in a tell-all book about the days after the assassination, Mary’s servant, dressmaker, and confidante Elizabeth Hobbs Keckley recalled “the wails of a broken heart, the unearthly shrieks, the terrible convulsions” of the bereft widow. Though those reactions might seem appropriate for a woman who witnessed her husband’s traumatic assassination at close range, they were seen as indicative of an unladylike craving for attention at the time.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.history.com/news/mary-todd-lincoln-assassination-facts#:~:text=Mary%20did%20not%20attend%20Lincoln%27s,Booth%20to%20kill%20her%20husband.>

Her sole surviving son, Robert, had her tried for insanity and forcibly institutionalized in an asylum for months. “At that trial, documents Jean Harvey Baker in *Mary Todd Lincoln: A Biography*, the housekeeper of a hotel where Lincoln had stayed gave a testimony describing the former First Lady’s manner as ‘often nervous and excitable. She was not like ladies in general.’”<sup>2</sup>

‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not mourn... But wisdom is vindicated by HER  
deeds.’

There is no one way someone is *supposed* to mourn after a death. There is no one way someone is *supposed* to celebrate an accomplishment.

The idea of what one is “supposed” to do in any given situation...  
The judgment that easily slips in when someone doesn’t live up to our  
expectations... When someone doesn’t do what we think they should  
do... How easily that bubbles up to the surface...

John the Baptist and Jesus were two very different people, who lived very different lives, but were proclaiming the same kingdom. John lived a very austere existence in the wilderness, wildly and dramatically calling people to repent. Jesus lived with the people, meeting them in their daily lives and drawing out the sacred, the holy, in their eating and healing and learning.

John was chastised for not being joyful enough.  
Jesus was chastised for being too joyful.  
How was a person of God *supposed* to act, anyway?

‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not mourn.’

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/people-have-spent-years-trying-diagnose-mary-todd-lincoln-beyond-grave-180961405/>

Friends, we have been in “Covid-times” for three years and four months. We went from decades of joyful bliss—hand shaking, hugging, chugging the chalice after a stranger in the pew next to us, singing loudly as a community of faith—to a deafening silence, a somber hyperawareness of breath and particles and transmission and fear. We stayed in cocoons of small bubbles of safety, and we asked questions about where others had been and how many entered the 6-foot hula hoop of boundary needed to at least not stay up all night in worry and dread.

As we have entered more fully into gathering as church—first with limited numbers, spread throughout skipped pews, then with masks and the requirement to snack on Jesus away from others, and then with a bit more risk and options and a loosening of requirements, we have baby-stepped ourselves to this moment. We have had to move with flexibility and adaptability depending on numbers of cases—which we were glued to like baseball scores—and we had to make choices for ourselves how close we wanted to participate or if we felt comfortable participating at all and if so, how to do so.

It has been exhausting. We have had to work through so many barriers and risks, and we have done the best we can with what we have had available... And St. Paul’s has been tremendously sensitive about any movements forward, and about how each decision impacts the most vulnerable in our midst. The two of us have been exceptionally impressed by the Vestry and the altar guild, as they have worked toward making all feel safe and making sure no one felt excluded. This is some hard work. Vestries haven’t had to work on literal life-and-death matters since the 1918 pandemic!

But there is one more boundary St. Paul's has not yet crossed—returning to sharing the Common Cup. Just as each parish has had to navigate the particularities of her parishioners in making decisions, so has each Bishop of the 110 dioceses of the 9 provinces in the 17 countries that make up The Episcopal Church had to make the most informed decisions when leading during this global pandemic. As such, St. Paul's (and all other parishes) has had to wait for the Bishop's directives in moving forward. Our Bishop has given us the signal to return to the Common Cup. Wisdom is vindicated by Her deeds and Bishop Susan has wisely called us into living out this old, but new experience in sharing this cup.

Many of us feel it is still too scary, that we are still in the funeral dirge, that there is still mourning to be done, and that we are not ready to drink from a shared cup. No amount of science about contamination, or spiritual or theological reasoning can make us feel safe or ready. That is okay.

Many of us feel in the words of Lizzo, that it's "about damn time" we return to the cup. "How long, oh Lord?" we have prayed and cried, waiting to participate fully in the sacramental meal that is central to our identity and faith. That is okay too.

'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;  
we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

Whether you are mourning or dancing at the idea of returning to the cup, our call is not to be pitted against one another, or to chastise for what we have done or left undone, or to chastise when one drinks or doesn't drink from the cup. We will continue to offer intinction as we make this transition. Of course, you can also choose to receive the bread only if that is where you are discerning Wisdom's voice.

There is no “one way” to live out our faithful callings. There is one Lord, one faith, one cup, and one Body of Christ. But the ways in which we live out our faithful lives are varied.

There are folks at St. Paul’s who are in recovery or for other reasons, do not take the wine. There are folks at St. Paul’s who are in recovery or for other reasons, take the alcohol-free wine. There are folks at St. Paul’s who are celiac or gluten intolerant or for other reasons take the gluten-free hosts. There are folks at St. Paul’s who cannot swallow right now or cannot be physically present in service who take the Spiritual Presence of the host and cup.

Some of us cross ourselves at the Triune Name (or elsewhere in the liturgy). Some of us do not. Some of us kneel or sit or stand at particular points. Some of us do not. Some of us bow at the Name of Jesus Christ. Some of us do not. Some of us love the Sanctus bells at the Eucharist. Some of us do not. Some of us love incense. Some of us would rather be anywhere else when the incense is swinging. Some of us say we are too high church here. Some of us say we are too low church here. And on and on...

I’ve said it before and I’ll say it often, church is a funky place, full of all of us who volunteer to be here! We volunteer to get up and head to the one place in our lives where we are guaranteed to be around a bunch of people who are not like us at all, because somehow we believe that being here with a gathered body allows us to worship and encounter the fullness of God and God’s love. We believe that our personal spirituality is enhanced, made better by, joining together with the living saints and sinners to participate in the Holy Meal Jesus said to remember him by. That Jesus reminded us over and over that we need each other to experience God’s Love in the world, that the Kin-dom of God is at hand when and especially when we gather together! What a wild thing!... And a holy thing...

There are numerous ways to participate in this most Holy and Blessed Sacrament of the Meal of the Table. There are many ways, but one meal. One invitation. One shared Communion of the Saints. And neither you nor I can make any claims about how one “should or should not” take it.

So, as we prepare in these next few weeks towards the Transfiguration, a celebration where we will re-introduce the cup, let us spend these weeks in focused prayer of preparation. Let us pray for our sisters and brothers and siblings who have been mourning or dancing. Let us confess the ways we have wished things to go otherwise. Let us prepare our hearts to be gentle and humble, so that we might receive those who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and give them rest...

This is the rest Jesus calls us to take up. This is the yoke of bearing with one another the heaviness we have felt in the mourning and in the dancing, and in the waiting, and in the fears of returning or the fears of never returning to the cup that we hold for ourselves and one another.

Only by sharing in the yoke of our siblings of the faith who are on the other side of the cup can we participate in the rest that Christ promises. We are one faith, one Body of Christ. There is one Lord, who is with us as we seek to bear the burdens of those we share a pew with, so that we can participate fully as living members of the Body of Christ. For we must remember that we too have been blessed, broken, and given for the world. It is only when we see each other as the blessed and broken body of Christ that we see the face of God. It is then that we can receive the cup of Christ, the cup of salvation for the world. Amen.