

**FROM CROSS TO CUP**  
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**John 3:1-17**

CAN one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?

That's the question that Nicodemus wants answered. It would certainly be a stretch of the imagination—not to mention the mother—to think that it could literally be true. Isn't that what Jesus is trying to show Nicodemus—that you can't approach everything with a literal mind? Sometimes we just have to let the wind blow through us and take us where it will. Even if that means letting go of what we've always assumed to be true.

Dave and I recently watched a movie that took our assumptions about aging and threw them to the wind, flipping them over and turning them inside out. Maybe you saw it—*The Curious Life of Benjamin Button*. Briefly, it's about a man who is born old and becomes younger as he "ages." In flipping our usual expectations about aging, the movie also challenges us to examine our expectations about loving relationships, birth and death, time, life, and the nature of being.

Several years ago another movie presented us with an opportunity to re-examine our stories and beliefs about The Last Supper and Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus. I'm talking about *The DaVinci Code*, of course.

It seems that the suggestion that Mary Magdalene was the "beloved disciple" sitting next to Jesus in DaVinci's portrait of The Last Supper was an absolute anathema to many people, especially to scholars and religious "authorities" who had spent their lives dedicated to a particular view of the way things have been and should be in the story of Christianity.

So here's what I'd like to suggest. Forget *The DaVinci Code*. Forget Mary Magdalene and whether or not she was sitting next to Jesus at The Last Supper. Forget all the ruckus that the idea of one woman at The Last Supper provoked. Let's invite the wind to blow through us. Let's re-enter the Womb of the World and see where it leads.

What if ALL of the disciples at that table were women? What if Jesus were a woman? What if all thirteen people at The Last Supper were women?

What? Who would serve? Who would prepare the meal and clean up? Who would feed and tend the children?

I am not saying that women are the only people who do these things. Far from it. For instance, the people who set up the Communion Table this morning were

men. But in the world that Jesus knew, it was the women who served. What if there had been thirteen women sitting around that table instead of thirteen men? In your mind, how would it have been different?

I see women there with children in their laps, nursing mothers, grandmothers, aunts, friends, and partners, with everyone pitching in to make sure that everyone was welcomed and fed and made comfortable. I see children running around and making noise. In other words, general chaos—like our house last night when the kids and grandkids were there. I hear conversations revolving more around birthing and relationships rather than dying and sacrifice.

This is not to deny the pain and suffering of life or to forget the death of Jesus on the cross. I'm just wondering if it's time to take another look at our assumptions and let the wind blow through us.

For instance, why is the cross almost always the key symbol for Christianity?

That is what Margaret Miles explores in her book *A Complex Delight: The Secularization of the Breast, 1350–1750*. Miles is author of a number of books on religious history, art, and gender, and taught at Harvard Divinity School and at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. In an article for *The Christian Century Magazine* (January 29, 2008), Miles writes that "for the first five centuries of the Christian movement the crucifixion was not depicted visually because it was too closely associated with a shameful criminal death to be useful as a symbol of love and redemption."

Miles goes on to explain that in art and in the writings of many early, prominent theologians, it was the nursing Virgin that primarily symbolized "God's loving provision of life, the nourishment and care that sustain life, and the salvation that promises eternal life." So what happened? How did God's love come to be symbolized by an image that reminds us of the crucifixion rather than a mother's milk?

For a carefully considered and researched answer, I recommend reading Miles' book. But in case you don't get around to that, I'm offering up my sound bite version. Essentially, what happened is that the breast was "crossed out" when it became "secularized." In other words, as a woman's breast became more of an object of anatomical examination and sexual arousal, it lost its religious associations and became "X" rated. All of this happened around the same time as the development of the printing press and the increased distribution of printed materials, including pornography.

So up came the cross and down went the breast.

Unfortunately, the profound act of violence associated with the cross did not prevent it from being used in association with more violence. Through centuries of crusades, religious wars, persecutions, and inquisitions, how often was the cross of Jesus lifted as a symbol Christianity's right to dominate and destroy?

Yet no kinder images have arisen to take its place. What have we lost as a symbol associated with violence and sacrificial death has replaced one depicting life-giving nurture?

We can't go back. We can't just erase all of the negative associations that these two symbols have accrued. Even the image of a nursing madonna has its limitations. For instance, as Margaret Miles writes, "thousands of Western paintings of mother and child have not been balanced by depictions that encourage us to picture fathers as providers of nurturing care." As she says, the "importance of such images cannot be exaggerated."

In our family alone, there are two fathers who have been the primary providers of nurturing care and homemaking. I wonder if the cross or the nursing mother works for them as the central symbol for God's love?

Is there another symbol, one that still has roots in the stories and teachings of this tradition, that could help to make the world a kinder and more just place?

What if we considered adding or substituting a symbol that has nothing to do with gender but everything to do with community?

What if this symbol came in all kinds of shapes and sizes?

What if it could be any color, plain or fancy; any material, common or sacred?

You've probably guessed that I'm talking about a cup. The cup of community and communion. The cup that welcomes everyone to everything, from a coffee hour to a soup dinner to The Lord's Supper. The cup of kindness from which we can all freely drink.

For God so loved the world that God gave us the cup of love so that whoever drinks of it may not perish but be ever nourished by the joy of life.