

"What Difference Does It Make?"

1 Corinthians 11:23-32

As she sat there looking into that 'just slightly larger than a thimble' little cup, a very odd question found itself lodged in Roberta's mind: Why did a small detail create such a large impact?

Never before had Roberta been more cognizant of the purple color of the juice that was in her communion cup. She'd been a member of Grace Redeemer for more than a decade. The bread and the cup had been passed and she had partaken - according to her quick calculations - more than a hundred times. And just now - for the very first time - she noticed the dark, deep purple-colored juice for what it was: A holy liquid that had been contaminated with sin - her sin.

She knew enough about The Lord's Supper to know that when Jesus passed the cup at the Last Supper for the first time, he told his disciples that the contents of the cup represented his blood. It symbolized a new covenant - a new way of relating - with them. But on this morning as she held the tiny cup in both her hands, she could not remove the contents of the cup from her mind. Try as she might, she could not shake the image of purity that had become infected because of her sin.

After the minister spoke the Words of Institution, he then, as usual, invited the congregants to eat the bread and drink the cup. The 'partaking' was followed by a time of 'reflecting.' And reflect she did. Roberta was still thinking about the color of the cup's contents. But it was also at just that moment when last night's incident with her husband

presented itself. And she remembered how she wasn't the only one who took issue with the color of grape juice.

"What's with this?" Eddie had asked as he picked up the juice bottle and held it in the line-of-vision of his wife. "I like my grape juice 'purple' - so I can tell it's grape juice. What's with this?" He emphasized the word 'this' by jerking the bottle toward her face in such a way that she could not ignore it.

"It was one of those 'Saturday Specials'," replied Roberta. "Three bottles for three dollars. I thought it looked like a good deal. Have you tasted it?"

"It's white-grape juice, for crying out loud," Eddie said. It was always Eddie, too. Not Ed; not Edward - Eddie. "There's no taste to white grape juice. How can there be? It isn't purple!"

"Oh you!" said Roberta good naturedly enough. "If I had thought that the color of grape juice made that much difference to you, I never would have bought the stuff." She was intentionally trying to keep things light; no use making Eddie mad over the color of some grape juice. "Grape juice is usually so expensive; I thought you'd be pleased with the money I saved. And you still haven't answered my question: Have you tasted it?"

"Like I said, Roberta: What's to taste?" And then a light bulb went off in Eddie's head. "You've tasted it, haven't you."

Her sheepish grin gave her away. "As a matter of fact, I have. That was the other thing that convinced me to buy it. I think it tastes more like grape juice than, well, than the grape juice you're used to."

"No way. Impossible. Grape juice tastes like grape juice because..." Eddie didn't know how else to say it, so he just said, "...because it's purple!"

Roberta decided to appeal to Eddie's practical side. "Look - I'm responsible for keeping this house clean. Purple grape juice stains something terrible! Counter tops, coasters - whatever it comes in contact with, it leaves a reminder that it's 'been there.' It stains as bad as blood." When she made that last statement, she had in mind the time she sliced her finger on the door of the clothes dryer. The clean and folded laundry placed neatly on top of the dryer at the time had caught the brunt of the spurting blood...much to Eddie's eventual consternation. A drop or two had also found its way onto one of Eddie's dress shirts. The stain was still noticeable - two months and 10 washings later.

Eddie knew exactly what she was getting at - and decided to take the offensive. "Have you ever had to clean grape juice from any of my clothes? Let me answer that for you: The answer is 'no.' Never. Not once." Then he got downright testy. "The next time you want to save money on the grocery bill, don't do me any favors by buying some flavor-less juice that says 'grape' on the label but isn't really grape juice. I can tell the difference."

She felt provoked and rose to the challenge. "You mean to tell me you can taste 'purple'?" Roberta's cheeks were just starting to look pink but she could already feel her face getting warm with indignation. "You can taste 'color'?" Then she unexpectedly smiled. "Prove it." With that, she grabbed the bottle of white grape juice and set it none too gently on the counter. Then she went to the pantry and after rummaging around for a couple of moments, her hand emerged with a bottle of purple grape juice. It was the same brand as the white grape juice. "Let's see just how accurate your taste buds are. Sit down," she commanded.

Dutifully, Eddie obliged. Roberta grabbed an extra large dishtowel and proceeded to 'blind-fold' Eddie's eyes with it. She moved a couple of steps toward the 'this 'n that' kitchen utensil drawer, opened it and located the 'cap snaffler' right on top. With this 'Christmas-past' Christmas gift in her right palm, Roberta placed it on the cap of first one bottle, then the next. Her left hand got situated on the wide neck of the bottle for leverage and, with a 'snap' of her wrist, the cap of each bottle was snapped open. She held each bottle under Eddie's nose and watched for tell-tale signs of recognition as she pronounced the words, "Sniff this!" Then she stuffed one bottle into each of his hands.

At first, Eddie's face merely registered a blank bewilderment. "Which is which," she said with a teasing tone that bordered on mockery. He sniffed harder - going from one bottle to the next, sliding each one gently under his nose and inhaling so strongly he practically snorted. But his face displayed no emotion of recognition.

"This doesn't prove a thing!" he mandated, which included a tone meant to nip his wife's victory in the bud. "I have to taste it."

So, just slightly re-tracing her steps, Roberta skirted over to the cupboard where the drinking glasses were kept and pulled out two of them with one hand, the glasses 'clinking' noticeably as she set them down on the counter top. Still blindfolded, Eddie guessed correctly what she was up to. "Now that's more like it," he said smugly, as if to prove an un-spoken point.

And so she poured some from each bottle into each glass - and reluctantly sniffed each before she handed them to Eddie. With a methodical procedure that would rival any wine taster, she took just a sip from each glass after she sniffed. Eddie's insistence that

he could tell the difference may have rattled her. But her taste buds now pushed aside any doubts. "Here you go," she said to him almost cheerfully. "Drink up."

And so he did. Or at least one gulp from each glass. He was almost ready to pronounce a verdict once - but when he drank from each glass again - just a sip this time - his confidence eroded like flood waters lapping against a loosely packed levy.

He couldn't distinguish between the two. He couldn't taste 'purple.' As hard as it was to admit this to himself, there was absolutely no way he would ever admit it to Roberta. So he did the only thing he could think of: he pretended to sneeze. One of those shoulder lurching, neck-snapping sneezes. And while he pretended to sneeze, he conveniently let each glass tumbler, tumble out of his hand and onto the floor. He listened to each glass crash and then shatter into what he imagined would be dozens of glass splinters as they hit the ceramic-tile floor of the kitchen.

Eddie wasn't sure what to do next - his spontaneity was just slightly ahead of any calculated plan he might have had - but his instincts were sure with him. He threw off the blindfold and lifted his stocking feet at the same time. With his mouth open and eyes uncovered, he took a quick glance at the floor. Seeing the mess and hoping for shards of glass all over the place, he turned his gaze to his wife. He paused just for a moment before uttering a pathetic, "Sorry," in his wife's direction. While he had faked a response of empathy, he was genuine in his desire to come out the victor. And if not the victor, he'd gladly settle for a convincing stalemate.

It was a compelling ploy - except that sometimes, Eddie tried way too hard to get out of a predicament where his pride might become an endangered species. And it was

obvious when he tried too hard because his efforts were as noticeable as whipped cream on chocolate pudding.

Roberta was vaguely aware of papers being shuffled around her as the minister directed the congregation to the closing prayer on the 'Service for the Lord's Supper' bulletin insert. Her communion cup was now empty - except for just a drop at the bottom. Even with a quantity that small, she was still drawn to the depth and deepness of the color; she was still puzzled about why she hadn't noticed it before. This is so dumb, she said to herself: I'm acting as if I'm in awe of the color purple.

No - that's not quite right, she decided. And then like an early morning mountain valley fog that finally lifts to reveal the most breath-taking view, it became clear to her: It's not the color purple I'm in awe of. What has my attention is what Christ did - for me. My sin - my own personal sin - is responsible for putting Jesus on the cross. If I did not sin, Roberta surmised, Jesus would not need to have died. If Jesus didn't have to die, I would not need to remember his redeeming death with the bread and cup - the visible signs of an invisible grace.

If there had been no sin, the blood of Jesus would not have been needed to wash the stain of sin. In that scenario, the blood of Jesus could have remained a vibrant red instead of getting tainted with the darkness of sin - which is what made it become a 'dirty purple' in color.

Were it not for my sin, Roberta deduced, the liquid that I drank from this cup would not have been purple.

The night before, she and Eddie may have argued about the difference between white and purple grape juice. Eddie had dug in his heels - refused to acknowledge his

pride - even sabotaged an opportunity for truth to have its way and make its mark. Eddie was confident that the color purple made all the difference in the world.

Which is the same thing Roberta learned. There was a difference, though. Roberta didn't want what she learned to teach her about anything except surrender - the complete and total surrender of her life - and of her sins. She had been in a 'stalemate' long enough and had - ultimately - been resisting the cleansing grace offered to her - confirmed to her - by what was in the cup. If she was honest with herself, there were many times when she, too, had 'sneezed' to escape her uncomfortableness in the face of truth and the confronting presence of Jesus. If she was honest with Jesus, there were lots of times when she had made up excuses so as to not feel the uncomfortable gaze of his eyes as he searched her heart. She didn't want to forget that it wasn't 'just' grape juice in the cup.

Hard to imagine how that could happen, though.

When you have a heart that's tender and teachable enough to learn about your sin, holding the color purple in holy awe is absolutely going to make a difference.