

Made for Communion

1 Cor. 11:23-26

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread,²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."²⁵ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Anyone heard these words before? When? For many of you, these words from the apostle Paul ARE communion. When you hear these words, a whole universe of associations begins flooding your brain: churches, pews, pastors, family, childhood... a hard or joyful moment in your life that you marked by the ritual of bread and cup.

Rituals are powerful. Ritual has come to have negative meaning in our culture--if something is "ritualized" it's un-critical, or mindless. But that doesn't stop people from loving SEC football games, which are powerful rituals. Rituals are public meaning making. The church, throughout its existence, has been "effective" at rituals. We've promoted rituals--and we've been especially excited about guarding rituals. We've said, "this is what this ritual means." "This is the way you have to do this ritual." We've fought over rituals. We've hurt people over rituals. We try to control rituals because rituals are powerful. You do a ritual a certain way and it enforces one kind of social meaning... but you do that same ritual another way, and you might get a completely different idea about what world you're living in... and how God interacts with that world...

I want to warn you that I'm about to poke around a little bit with communion. Some of you may find what I'm about to say disrespectful or even painful. I want you to know that all that I'm saying today comes out of a place of love. I love the rituals of the church. I know--I've experience--how rituals can be amazing and deeply humanizing. But rituals can also be de-humanizing. They can be toxic and harmful... they can convey lies as well as truth, they can de-form us just as quickly as they form us. Rituals can fail. We, who love and believe in rituals, have to have the courage to explore our most sacred rituals, and if we find them in any way harmful, to re-shape them. (That's a long preface... are you with me?)

Let's begin by saying there is no one way to share communion. There is profound diversity in the Christian tradition, not only in how communion is shared, but in what it we say it means. Catholics say that the bread is Jesus' body and the cup is Jesus' blood. Others Christians say the bread and cup are only that, but it's our act of remembering Christ that transforms us. Presbyterians have split the difference--we've said that Christ is truly present--spiritually--in the sacrament. Some churches drink wine; some drink grape juice--a practice that grew out of the temperance movement and the commercialized production

of grape juice. Some folks eat wafers; some eat bread; some kneel, others stand. Some share the sacrament every Sunday; others four times a year.

I grew up in Presbyterian churches where Communion was celebrated once a month. In every church I remember, the ritual was similar. A clergyperson would stand behind a table at the front of the sanctuary--a long way away from the pews. The pastor would pick up bread and break it and pour juice into a cup. And there would be a lot of words spoken--and always these particular words from Paul, which I never knew were from Paul; I always assumed they were from Jesus. And after all the words were done, a team of people would descend on the table and with military precision they would pick up plates and stacked metal trays, and they would head out to the aisles and begin to pass the contents around.

What was in those plates and trays? First, very small square cubes of white bread, the size of a dice. And then, a large metal tray filled with 40 very tiny cups of grape juice. And as this was happening, the organ was playing softly as the whole congregation sat quietly, reverently. I'm not sure what others people were thinking, but I always assumed we were having our spiritual communion with Jesus by ourselves. I think we were supposed to be thinking of Jesus' sacrifice, of Jesus, mercy, and being forgiven of sin. I would let the bread dissolve on my tongue. Then down the juice in one swig, being careful not to spill Jesus on the nice clothes I was wearing.

I need to confess to you that this way of eating this meal never made sense to me. We called it the Lord's Supper but it didn't look or feel like any other supper I ate ever in my life. It was called Communion, but at no other table I ever sat at was there less conversation or communing than this one. It was an individualized. More than once growing up, I wondered, "what on earth had happened to get from Jesus--laughing and eating with a motley group of friends and strangers... to this?" Remember, in the gospels, Jesus is called a "glutton and a drunkard?" No one, watching Presbyterian communion, could accuse us of having too much fun.

Clearly, this way of celebrating communion (which again, always seemed like a strange word because no other celebrations I attended were as solemn as this one) came out of the Protestant strain of the Christian tradition. The ritual we inherited is solemn. It's serious. It's wordy. It's individualized. It's interior.

In seminary, I got to study with a man named Hal Taussig. Hal is a New Testament scholar who has done wonderful work on meals in the New Testament. Hal taught a bunch of stuff that began to re-work in my mind what communion was and is. The first thing he wanted us to know is that Jesus ate Roman-style banquets.

That means that the diners didn't sit at a table. In Roman banquet meals, people laid in one another's laps. There is a kind of intimacy here, physical closeness. The second thing that Hal said is that meals in Jesus' time were places where social order was inscribed. In Roman society, honor was the currency of life. Meals conferred honor. To be invited to meal

was a huge deal. Just as important was where you sat at the meal--the most honored guest sat next to the host.

We know from the Christian tradition that Jesus ate a lot of meals. Eating was a huge part of his revolutionary ministry. Most of us also know that the way Jesus ate was controversial. His meals were intentionally disruptive. How? First of all, he invited *dishonorable* people to his meals. Instead of hosting meals with influential people, Jesus stuck his thumb in the eye of those who benefited from the meal-centered honor system. Jesus said, at the table of God, the least honorable people get the places of honor. Jesus meals enacted the social reversal that happens in the Realm of God.

We also know from the gospel stories that Jesus participated in miraculous feedings; there are several stories in which thousands and thousands of people are fed. Those kinds of huge meals would only have been provided by somebody insanely wealthy--they would have been a public display of that person's power--and the loyalty owed to them. But Jesus hosted his own huge feasts--again, subverting the power of the elites to gain power as "benefactors."

Then, in Jesus' most famous meal, the Last Supper, he gets down on his knees and washes the disciples' feet. He steps into the role of the lowest-status person. He is modeling for his friends how they should live--he's also exposing the depravity of a culture that renders some people as "high status" and others as "low status." We don't know exactly what Jesus said that night with his disciples. Clearly, by the time of Paul, and then by the time of gospel writers, Jesus' followers had already embraced a form of a ritual meal. The Last Supper stories in scripture are beautifully drawn stories in which the meal becomes invested with powerful themes: service, sacrifice, and Christ's abiding presence. We don't know exactly what Jesus said to his disciples, but surely something like: "keep eating meals... and when you do... you will remember me." The communion meal comes from the earliest part of the Jesus tradition. Luke affirms that Christ "is known in the breaking of the bread."

We who would still follow Jesus are expected to share meals together.

But the question we must ask is "what kind of meal?" What does a meal that "remembers" Jesus look like?

Christianity has never had a standard way to practice communion. The Didache, the oldest expression of Christian liturgy, has the cup coming before the bread and implies that we should be eating a full meal! Neither the Didache nor John's gospel include the words, "on the night that Jesus was handed over." My point here is that there is not a "right" way to celebrate communion. The "right" way is the way that makes Jesus present with us. That presence will look and feel different as we change the form of the sacrament.

There is not a “right” way to share Communion. When we put our bodies in certain places, when we use certain objects, when we change venues, and change the words we say, our sense of what communion with Jesus is about can radically change.

What if Communion weren’t just a “spiritual” meal. What if it were an actual meal?

- A friend of mine shared a story of serving communion at a local shelter. One particular man wandered around the room the whole time, and kind of made everyone uncomfortable with his presence. As the sacrament was served, he waited until the very end, and approached my friend, pointed to the half-loaf of bread left, and asked, “Can eat the whole thing?” Shouldn’t there be such real food at every Communion celebration?
- I helped co-found a “church” in New York City in the mid-2000s called *ecclesia nyc*. We built a communion table on wheels. Every Sunday, at 12:30, we would fill the chest beneath the table with a pot of soup and some sandwiches from the church kitchen and the bread and cup, and we would roll the table down the sidewalk 4 blocks to Madison Square Park, where we would have church for whomever wanted to gather--mostly the men who spent their days in the park because they had no home of their own. We would share the sacrament of bread and cup, then the sacrament of soup.

What if Communion were so central to the life of the church that the Sanctuary were reconceived as a dining hall?

- My good friend, Bill, gathered a congregation in a shut-up church in Philadelphia called Broad Street Ministry. They spread out tables in the middle of that sanctuary and they share the sacrament of a meal--the hosts serve the guests, who, again, are mostly men and women who have been dishonored by living without homes.

This table can take so many shapes and forms.

It’s a meal. It’s a place where people are fed. It’s a delight to the senses. A reminder that a spirituality that doesn’t take care of our bodies is no spirituality at all. It’s the real presence of Christ--a tangible reminder of Jesus’ sacrifice and love for you. It’s a foretaste of the Beloved Community. At this table, our imaginations are provoked about the kind of world that gets configured when the table is our central theological image. This meal becomes an image for the whole of life--it becomes our “common project” - our work in this world is to always be building table extensions. The holiest thing you can do in this life is pull up another chair.

When this table is working, we find ourselves filled with the real presence of Christ. And we find ourselves hungry for a world in which every one of us is loved and fed.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.