

From the Lord's Supper To Holy Communion

TEXT:
Matthew 26:17-30
I Corinthians 11:23-29

April 27, 2008

At the heart of Christian worship is the simple act of breaking bread. The cup and the loaf mean something different to each of us. Our experience may be shaped by the practice of our home church as a young person, or the traditions of a different denomination, or by a life-altering event that has brought new meaning to the simple act of eating bread.

I was confirmed in the Methodist Church. In that tradition, we would come forward to kneel at the alter rail – a two-foot high fence or gate that surrounded the communion table – and the minister would come and offer the bread and an assistant would follow with the tray of cups. You would remain there in silent prayer before returning to your seats. No matter how long I have been a Presbyterian, I still like the idea of coming forward for communion, to be an active participant in the sacrament. Presbyterians, it seems to me, are much more passive about communion, sitting back, waiting for the elements to come to us.

For others, they experience their personal attachments with communion in different ways. I have a friend who was an elder in her church who was about to go off the Session. Her disappointment came because she would no longer receive

Communion from the minister. Rather, she would be sitting in the pew with everyone else, receiving the bread on those sterile silver plates.

Another person I met at a conference several years ago was a priest in what was called the Old Catholic Church, a small group that had broken away from the Roman church in the late 19th Century. He and I were talking about Communion in an ecumenical setting. He said that for him, Communion didn't have any meaning unless it was served by someone of the rank of Archbishop or higher!

The Silver Spring Presbyterian Church, where I served in the early 1990's, had quite a number of West Africans among its members, mostly from Cameroon. Whenever their friends and relatives would come to visit, they would always bring them to church. When communion was served, all those visitors would come up to me and hand me a little card. They would ask me to sign the card, stating that they had had communion with us. They would return home and report to their pastor that they had been faithful and had taken communion while they were here in the United States.

It takes all kinds of people to fill the table of the Lord's Supper. Different types of people, different traditions and different understandings of what the bread

and the wine might mean. We might call it Eucharist, or the Mass, or the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion. We might take the bread standing, kneeling, or sitting; coming to the table, or sitting in the pew: communion means something different to each and every one of us.

Imagine for a moment, it is the evening of the first day of the week, the day when the business life of Jerusalem resumes after the Sabbath rest. As the day turns into evening, the narrow streets are emptied. Shopkeepers collect their wares, workmen mingle on one corner, a farmer coaxes a donkey out of a stall and toward home.

Down a narrow street, you see men and women gathering near a small door. The group is made up of old and young. You see a Roman slave, a Jewish couple with some wealth, a younger man dressed in military robes, and two young women with their faces covered. We follow them into a large room where a group of thirty or forty people gathers around a simple wooden table.

In the center of the group a man reads from a scroll. The people listen intently. When he finishes he rolls up the scroll and an elder man steps into the dim light and begins to speak. He is the Elder for the community. The people draw close to hear his every word. He encourages the small gathered community to fulfill in

their lives what they have just heard in the sacred texts.

When his words are finished, the group began to chant psalms. Then they lift their hands and begin to pray, offering simple prayers for one another. One of their members has been executed for refusing to bow to the Emperor; they pray for her. Others are in jail, awaiting trial. Sickness, persecution, poverty, the birth of a child – all are mentioned in their partitions. They finish with a loud “Amen.” They turn and hug one another, giving what they called the “kiss of peace.” They then prepare themselves for the evening meal.

Those who are Deacons move among the people and collect loaves of bread and place them on the table in the middle of the room. A wonderful aroma of the fresh baked bread fills the small room. One of the group leaders, standing with his hands stretched over the bread, offers a prayer of thanksgiving. He reminds everyone of Christ’s meal with the disciples in the upper room, and how Christ broke bread and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Each person takes a large piece of the bread and sips from a large cup of wine. After everyone has eaten, the Deacons collect the leftover bread and wine, which will be taken to orphans and widows in the congregation. With the recent wave of persecutions, there are many to be fed.

The Elder then raises his hands over the people and blesses them. They go forth, slipping out into the now deserted streets. They leave in silence. They have been fed. They have been

nourished. They have been with their Lord. And now they are ready to return to the world.

It is remarkable to note how similar our experience in worship is with those who worshipped in the middle of the second century. What I just shared with you was a description of early Christian worship around the year 150. It was written by Justin Martyr who was trying to explain Christian practices to the non-Christian world in which they existed. Then as now, eating the bread and drinking the cup, “in remembrance of me,” was the central shared experience of the followers of Jesus.

By the third century, the church had developed a more formal service of communion. The prayers began to become standardized. In fact, the basic structure of the service of Holy Communion that we use today, can be seen in the practices developed 1700 years ago. The central prayer of the service was called the Eucharistic prayer. That means “the great prayer of thanksgiving” – the word “Eucharist” is the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” And in it we thank God for all of God’s saving activity in the world and we thank God for the bread and the wine that nurtures our very soul.

The Protestant Reformation brought some changes to the practice of communion. Martin Luther celebrated the service in the language of the people. Up to his time it was all done in Latin. Now the people would comprehend what it was all about. The service of communion, or High Mass, was seen more as a sacred drama to observe than a ritual in which to

partake. In the Reformed tradition – our theological heritage – communion became less frequent. This was not Calvin’s idea. Calvin believed it should be regularly, as often as every week, but his Session had other ideas. They insisted it be done once a quarter, which became the tradition throughout the Reformed churches.

And now, 20 centuries later, the bread and the cup are still at the heart of our life together as a people of God. For many of us, there has been a wonderful rediscovery the meaning of the Eucharist for our spiritual journey. This is in part why we have begun to serve communion each week at our early service. This provides an option for those who like to experience the intimacy, the strengthening and the assurance that comes with the bread and cup.

I want to leave you this morning with one more story about Communion. It’s the story we will be reading next week. It is a familiar and popular story. In the evening, on that first Easter, two of the disciples were walking down a road to the village of Emmaus. They fall in with a stranger and begin to talk about deep things of life. Eventually the night came and they found an Inn together and they sat down at a small, simple wooden table. While they were there, the stranger took the bread, and after he had given thanks, he broke it, and as Luke says, their eyes were opened.

When we come to the table of the Lord we come that our eyes might be opened. We come that we might understand in a new and meaningful way who Jesus Christ is for us. We come that we might understand in a new

and meaningful way how this bread may have meaning for our lives and in our world today. We come that we might understand in a new and meaningful way the call that Christ has placed on our lives, to come and follow him.

Do this, he said, “In remembrance of me.”

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