

This Is the Joyful Feast of the People of God

TEXT:
Luke 24:13-33

May 4, 2008

Here are two disciples of Jesus, stunned and in disbelief at the sudden turn of events, sitting at a table with a stranger, about to eat some ordinary bread. Little did they know what a potent symbol of life the bread offered them. Then the stranger, whom they would come to understand as the risen Jesus, took the bread, offered thanks and broke it, and gave it to them. In a moment, they came face-to-face with the mystery, surprise, strength, faith, and hope that come with the Christian act of breaking bread. "Their eyes were opened and they recognized him." From that moment on, the world had a wonderful and powerful symbol of the living Christ.

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament of the church. Sacraments are rituals or acts that symbolize God's gifts of grace in tangible, visible, ordinary, and touchable ways. To put it more simply, a sacrament is where the holy touches our lives; we are drawn closer, we connect, and we experience the holiness of God in something as ordinary and simple as bread. This morning I want to talk about communion and offer some ways that the sacrament strengthens our spirit and enriches our lives for the journey of faith that lies ahead.

Even the various names we give to the sacrament illustrate the

great benefit we receive from communion. When we call it the Lord's Supper, we are reminded of the original experience at the table that was shared by Jesus and his disciples. We call it Holy Communion, reminding us that when we sit at the Table, we are in the presence of Christ and our sisters and brothers in Christ. We call it the Eucharist, which means, "to give thanks." This reminds us that the sacrament is an act of joy and thankfulness for the work of God in Christ. In the Roman Catholic tradition, it is called the Mass. This term comes from the words spoken at the end of the supper when the Priest says, "You are sent out." In the mass, Christians receive the nourishment and sustenance they need in order to go out into the world and do the work that they are supposed to do. Like different facets of a brilliant diamond, each of these names – Lord's Supper, Holy Communion, Eucharist, and the Mass – helps us to see signs of the grace that comes with this meal.

Do we understand all that happens at communion? Probably not. Theologians have written volumes trying to fathom the mystery of the holy supper. I remember in my first church we started allowing the children to take communion with the rest of us. One mother objected saying that her two children didn't know what communion meant. She wanted me to teach them in a special class where they would

learn everything they could about the sacrament before they took the bread and cup. While the class would have been fine, I said simply, "Neither they nor I will ever know everything there is to know about communion. All we know is that Jesus said 'Take and eat.'" And so we do.

Notice that Jesus said, "Take and eat," and not "Take and understand." One thing the church does too much is to try to give an explanation for God when what people really want is to experience God. As John Calvin once said of communion, "I would rather experience it than understand it."

How do we come to experience God's gift of grace in the breaking of the bread? Briefly, let me suggest three ways; remembering, nourishment and community.

First off, there is the act of remembering. In our story this morning, the two disciples had their epiphany when they remembered what Jesus had said when he first broke bread. In the Upper Room, he said, "Do this often, remembering me." The word remembering in Greek is *anamnesis*. There is no exact English translation for this word. It can mean recalling, re-enacting, or experiencing anew. A literal understanding might be, "in doing these acts one experiences again the reality of Jesus Christ himself."

My best friend Brian died of a brain tumor a number of years ago. From time to time there are things that happen which bring him very much to mind. For example, Brian was a pastor of a church in California when he died. At the General Assembly each year, they read the names of ministers who had died in the past year. When that list is read I think of him. Another friend runs a football pool for the College Bowl games. He calls it the Brian Boughter Memorial Chili Bowl Challenge. When I make my selections I remember watching all the games on New Years Day with him, eating his homemade chili.

Communion brings the past into the present; we re-live something Jesus himself did with his friends, it connects us with an event long ago which is now real and alive in the breaking of the bread. Phyllis mentioned this in the children's moment last week. We never experienced Jesus personally, we didn't live when he lived, but we can remember who he was, and what he did, and how he impacts our lives when we re-live the breaking of the bread.

In communion, we do something very specific that Jesus did, and thus, we remember the Lord Jesus Christ.

The second thing communion does is nourish our spirits. The bread and the cup feed our soul. After the two disciples recognized Jesus in the broken bread, they said, "Were not our hearts burning within us when he spoke?" The broken bread kindled something deep within them.

For us as Presbyterians the sacrament, is "God's offer [of]

continued spiritual nourishment upon which our eternal life depends." In other words, each time we repeat the action of the supper we are strengthened and nurtured, our hearts made warm, and God draws nearer to us.

You might think of it this way: communion is the difference between receiving a letter from someone you love and having that someone there to embrace you. A letter is fine, but nothing beats a hug from your beloved. Every time we look at the elements on the table we know that God did not simply write a letter or send a sermon. Our God got involved in the drama of salvation. Our God's love was not content to remain aloof, off in the clouds somewhere; that love comes in the flesh, in a manger, in a young Jew from Nazareth, on a cross. Communion is a reality that we embrace, and in it, the love and grace of God embraces us.

As we are nourished, the Lord's Supper transforms our spirit. Martin Luther had a very colorful way to describe what Communion does for us. It is as if a wolf devoured a sheep and the sheep was so powerful a food that the wolf was transformed and turned into a sheep.

Thirdly, the Supper connects us with our sisters and brothers throughout the world and throughout the history of our faith. Once their eyes were opened, immediately, the two disciples went to tell the others what they had witnessed in the broken bread. Communion becomes a shared act, an act of the Christian community.

The Supper is the great equalizer of the church. In the early church, at the table of the Lord, there was no male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free. The church was the only place in that culture where all people could and did come together.

Today, Christians the world over are deeply divided over issues of tradition, authority and practice. We might not eat the bread in the same way, or have the same interpretation of its meaning, but the bread unites us in a way that nothing else does. The bread of communion is something we all do. In this shared meal Christians become sisters and brothers in Christ. All who come to the table, hungry and yearning to be fed by Christ, leave the table filled, full of God's love. At the table, we are Christ's family.

A few years ago I was part of an ecumenical delegation to the memorial service for the Episcopal Bishop of Washington, the Most Reverend John Walker. Attendance at the service was President George H. W. Bush. The climax of the service was the Lord's Supper, and presiding at the table was Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa. This was at a time when apartheid was still the cruel political reality in South Africa.

What a picture of the unity of the Lord's Supper to see the man with the most temporal power in the world take bread from the man with the most spiritual power in South Africa: these two men, separated by race, wealth, nationality, perspectives on the racial practice of apartheid, but united by the bread and wine of Christ.

At the table of the Lord, we remember the life, death and the life again of the Lord Jesus Christ, we are nurtured by his Spirit, and we are bound together to the glory of God. The stranger took the bread, blessed it, gave it to them and their eyes were opened. May it ever be so for you.

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