

The Eucharist in Community

When I was a boy, I would go to church sporadically, sometimes to the Catholic Church with my grandmother, sometimes to the church up the road with a friend from school - but whenever I went, I was curious about the ritual, the mystery, then solemnity of it all.

And nothing was more solemn than the taking of the Eucharist often known as Communion, one of the highest and most solemn rituals, particularly in the Catholic Church, and as I learnt more about this practice, it just got more mysterious. Praying over a piece of bread and some wine and believing that it's someone's body? To a ten year-old's mind this was unfathomable - almost like a magician's trick - but to me it still looks like bread and still smelled like grape juice.

Most of you here are probably pretty familiar with the way most Protestant denominations practice the Eucharist... The reading of the liturgy, and the long pauses for reflection throughout, during the celebration of communion itself make me feel a connection to hundreds or thousands of other churches that celebrate in the same way: this isn't some crazy practice that my own church came up with; it's an act of worship that I practice along with fellow Christians all over the world.

The problem in my head is that I can't think of anything that feels less like sharing a communal meal with Jesus and my fellow believers than nibbling tiny bread squares and sipping a spoonful of grape juice out of a miniature plastic cup. I often ponder a fantasy version of the Lord's Supper in which the entire church gathers for a huge meal—a community event marked by laughter, fellowship, and prayer and closed with the breaking of the bread and drinking of wine. (Except you'd get to eat a whole piece of bread if you wanted, and drink wine out of a real glass.) Now this isn't necessarily practical, or what anyone else wants, but what I propose for today is that we treat this as a celebration, an opportunity to remember Christ and give thanks, and let's do it as a community.

I don't get to preach very often, and I'm more familiar with the series style of sermons, working your way through a book. However, this opportunity to preach allowed me to spend more time in the bible and dwelling on Jesus than I normally do. The idea for this sermon came from a chapter I was reading several months ago in a book by Eugene Peterson called *Christ Plays in Ten thousand Places*, it introduced a way of examining the Eucharist that I had not encountered before, and while studying about the Eucharist, I realized how little is said in protestant churches about the meanings and layers of this ritual.

This celebration is called the Eucharist in some traditions, Eucharist comes from a Greek word meaning "to give thanks." Jesus gave thanks, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples; raised the cup and gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples. Here at The Junction, we also consider it a thanksgiving feast, or a Eucharist, to give thanks. Often it is called Communion, meaning "a shared or mutual participation." Communion is not a word that we find in the Bible, instead it comes from the word "community." However, the Bible has a word that it uses for this celebration, and the term is "the Lord's Supper." Paul actually uses that phrase in [1 Corinthians 11](#) to describe what we are going to do today. The Lord's Supper is what he calls it.

So what does a meal 2,000 years ago have to do with us as a church today? How does our understanding of this meal affect our community at the Covenant Church? Why should we continue practicing this ritual? How should we practice it?

Let's pray.

Prayer

Jesus, today we consider the significance of your last meal before your death and resurrection, open our eyes to remove the cultural beliefs and misconceptions that may take away from our understanding of the significance of this meal. We are so removed from Jerusalem 2000 years ago in

our daily lives, Lord awaken in us a sense of the mystery and community that has surrounded the practice of his meal throughout the ages.

And most of all, Jesus, guide my words, guide our thoughts and help us all learn something from this time today, and prepare ourselves to receive the bread and the wine.

Amen

The Background

The four gospels share a pretty common account of the last supper, today we'll read from Mark.

Mark 14:12-17,22-26 The Lord's Supper

12On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus' disciples asked him, "Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

13So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him.14Say to the owner of the house he enters, 'The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'15He will show you a large upper room, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there."

16The disciples left, went into the city and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

17When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve.

22While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."

23Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.

24"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them.25"I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God."

26When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

This familiar story is worth dwelling on - just hours before the betrayal by Judas, his trial and crucifixion, Jesus shares a meal with his closest friends. This was his Church, his community, those he could relax and worship God with. The Passover meal was a special occasion for the Jews, similar to sharing a thanksgiving meal for Canadians, you would usually reserve this meal for family and only the closest of friends.

The meal itself was likely simple: hors d'oeuvres, lamb, unleavened bread, and wine; the symbolic significance of the meal, however, was rich and complex. The Passover was a festive occasion—a celebration of the nation's release from Egyptian bondage, and this meal commenced the week-long feast of the Unleavened Bread. Only later did the disciples realize the irony of this joyous occasion that pointed to the death of the Messiah.

The ritual was always the same, involving the selection of an unblemished lamb, slaughtering the lamb, cleansing the house of leaven, footwashing, handwashing, four cups of ritual wine, prayers, psalms - the process was complex and the father of the house always lead the proceedings.

A ritual protects the common, but often essential elements of human life from reduction and exploitation. It has been said that you can't take charge of a ritual - you can only enter into one, and both the Eucharist, and its predecessor, the Passover Meal are rituals of Salvation, not salvation observed and celebrated alone, but Salvation in Community.

Note that through this sermon, I'll be using the term Eucharist as a synonym of the Lord's Supper, Meal, Communion, Table, in my mind these terms are interchangeable, as has long been the practice of the church.

Jesus deviates from the standard script of the passover when he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to the disciples saying, "Take it, this is my body". At this point Jesus turns this meal into a kind of hybrid, a mixture of an Old Testament Passover celebration, along with the institution of a New Testament Lord's Table (or communion) celebration.

The form of the Eucharist in this passage is what we are going to focus on today, there are four verbs, "Take, Bless, Break, Give", and it is interesting to note that this is the same form that is expressed in Jesus multiplying the Fish and Bread in Mark 8:

1During those days another large crowd gathered. Since they had nothing to eat, Jesus called his disciples to him and said,²"I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat.³If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."

4His disciples answered, "But where in this remote place can anyone get enough bread to feed them?"

5"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.
"Seven," they replied.

6He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. When he had taken the seven loaves and given thanks, he broke them and gave them to his disciples to set before the people, and they did so.⁷They had a few small fish as well; he gave thanks for them also and told the disciples to distribute them.

What's so important about these four words? They offer an insight into the ministry and community that Jesus expects from us as a church. These four words have been described as the Shape of the Eucharist, and each word, each verb, is like a movement in a Concerto.

Take

The first verb is Take - Jesus takes the bread. This indicates a sacrifice, something given for the community, that Jesus can use. Jesus takes what we bring him. Implicit in his taking is our offering. We offer, he takes. This is the opposite to much of how our culture operates when it comes to God. We usually come to God asking for things, asking for signs and miracles, asking for money, asking for comfort, but we forget that God expects and accepts our offerings, even if all we have is ourselves, complete with sin and shame. Augustine was quoted as saying, "There you are upon the Table, there you are in the Chalice", meaning that the bread and wine about to be blessed, broken and given starts out as our offering.

This sets the stage for salvation, God receives us, and all we are, all we have to offer, just as we are. There's no extortion, no exploitation, no bargaining, no coercion, God takes only what we offer.

Bless

What we offer to Jesus, Jesus offers to God with thanksgiving. He doesn't criticize it, or reject its flaws, he didn't say to the boy, "How am I going to feed all these people with two fish? Couldn't you find more?" Jesus blesses what we bring as an offering.

The blessing Jesus gives is probably similar to how we typically pray at meals today, thanks for the meal and for the provisions that God gives us, we're not told of the exact words, and in that I see simplicity. I doubt Jesus undertook a great pontificating sermon style of prayer, even though He knew it was his last meal with his friends. What can we learn from this? Keep it simple to leave room to enjoy the community.

The blessing defines the source of the food, and the point of eating the food - we give thanks to God for provision and for salvation.

During the supper, Jesus stated that the bread and wine that they were eating and drinking was in some way or another, (he didn't explain), his life, his body and blood. The very next day this flesh and blood was offered up on the cross at Golgotha as a sacrifice for our sins, and became our salvation. When we enact the Eucharist in our common worship, in community, we understand that this same Jesus, the Jesus who is the word of Creation, incarnation, and redemption, who was a perfect, sinless sacrifice, who offered himself up for our sins and our life, for the whole world includes us in the offering, our bodies as a living sacrifice.

Back to the passover meal, remember the practice of searching the home for leaven, looking in every nook and cranny for traces of the agent. Leaven was identified with sin in the old testament, Just before emancipating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, God revealed to them this analogy: "For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day through the seventh must be cut off from Israel." (Exodus 12:15). For this seven-day period only, leaven is a type of sin.

The *unleavened* bread symbolizes the incarnation of God in human flesh, sinless, the wine is a visual symbol of His shed blood and violent death as the divine provision for men's forgiveness of sin. These elements are blessed before they are broken in community.

Break

Our gifts don't remain the same as what we bring. Isn't this often the case, a mug given as a present for someone who loves coffee ends up as a pen holder down in the basement office, still useful, just not what was intended. How often have you arrived at Church ready to partake in communion with your best manners, so self sufficient, so poised, so polished. At the table we are not permitted to be self-enclosed or self-sufficient. Jesus exposes our coverups, our inadequacies. Jesus needs access to our heart to do the work of regenerating our lives, pride just gets in the way of our understanding of Jesus' work.

The verb *break* also refers to the image of Jesus' body as a sacrifice, Isaiah 53 provides us with some imagery of this...

Verse 5.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

Verse 10.

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the LORD makes [c] his life a guilt offering,

It is impossible for us to interpret the Christian life as one of untroubled serenity, without suffering, pain, humiliation and rejection.

The early church also identified the symbolism of one loaf of bread, the body of Christ, with the church community, 1 Cor 10:17.

Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

Salvation is not a self-help program. Holy living, resurrection living, is not a self-project. We are a people of God and cannot live holy lives, resurrection lives, as individuals. We are not a self defined community, we are a God defined community, and that definition includes brokenness.

Give

The final verb: Jesus gives back what we bring him. This is the Holy Communion, this is the moment when we commune with Christ as a community. What we bring is changed, changed into what God gives, this is grace.

We see this in the feeding of the thousands, everything we bring to Jesus is given back but with unbelievable generosity thrown in. We eat the bread and drink the cup and know that Christ is in us, that we are in community with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The communion we have in and with Christ must reverberate in the communion we have with one another. This means that there are no solitary Christians in the world of salvation. There are no D.I.Y. Christians. Salvation is not a private deal with God. Salvation is God's work in Jesus, in us. Salvation is not a project of self, salvation revolves around this meal, the meal that those who are saved can share, sharing implies personal participation, trust, forgiveness, in specific places, with people who have names, requiring personal and conversational language. In today's fast food culture, we forget the importance of these things, we forget the effort required in preparing a meal, even a simple loaf of bread.

Simplicity

Jesus takes an old tradition, adds to it new significance, and says, from now on, do *this* in remembrance of *me* -- not the Passover, but *me*. The "Do this" refers to the whole four-fold liturgical Eucharist, the sacramental meal. Christianity revolves around the regular practice of this meal, the regular reenactment of this founding act.

While impressed with the significance of this Last Supper, I cannot overlook its simplicity. It is described in the most ordinary term. There is no elaborate ceremony given in explicit detail as, for example, we would find in the Old Testament. It is amazing how ceremony can often overshadow the symbolism of such an event. If there were ceremony detailed for us we would concentrate our attention and our energies on reproducing these same ritualistic forms. We are prone to substitute ritual for reality, details for devotion.

Remembrance

We do not believe in what is called "sacramentalism" -- that communion is a necessary step toward

salvation. We do not believe that the Eucharist has to be partaken in order for you to receive grace on your journey toward redemption. We believe that you are saved completely apart from the communion service, or from the Eucharist, or from the Mass. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." I take the memorial view, that when we partake of these elements, we are doing it in remembrance of Him. We are reflecting upon our redemption. We are reflecting upon his body and his blood that purchased for us our salvation. That is the memorial view of communion. That is the first purpose, I think, in our practice of communion. It is as a redeemed community that we reflect upon our redemption that we have in Jesus Christ. What a beautiful picture! The bread and the wine, the bread and the juice, act as symbols -- tokens -- that represent the body of Jesus Christ that was broken for us, the blood of Jesus Christ that was shed for us, for the forgiveness of sins. What a beautiful picture that is.

Conclusion

We are to devote ourselves to this symbolic representation of all Christ did in redeeming us. We are to devote ourselves to this act. Communion represents the best that Christianity has to offer. Celebrating communion, celebrating the Lord's Table is our finest hour as Christians.

Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

We all have our own personal rituals with the Eucharist, some Churches like to have one cup, one piece of bread, some like to wait until everyone is served before eating and drinking, these are not the important things, let's remember Luke's words in Acts 2,

"They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people".

As a final note, I'd encourage all bible studies to regularly celebrate the Eucharist. The ritual does not need to be led by a Priest or Pastor, you don't need to be wearing any special clothes, or have holy water or incense on hand. Any believer should feel welcome to lead this celebration in their community, and we should get into the habit of practicing this to regularly remember our Lord. Let's pray.

Prayer

Heavenly father, you know where each of your children stands in their faith, so much of our North American Christian life is about how well we can learn to hide our sin. We measure the growth of our spirituality by how little we sin, or at least by how little we can convince everybody, and perhaps ourselves, we are sinning. We live in fear of our sins being exposed, that we'll be found out. We are tired of living polished facades, Father, part of me wishes that all our sins could be exposed, broadcast on the five o'clock news so we could stop playing this game that separates us from real community. If we truly knew each other, if we couldn't hide, behind our smiles, we would have nothing to grasp onto but Jesus Christ, and really Father that is all we have anyway. But the truth is Lord, we can not hide any of our sins from you, our sins are exposed, you know us better than we know ourselves. But Jesus has forgiven us, help us take joy in the fact, not that our sins are not real, but that they are real, and You are a real Saviour. Continually remind us of salvation, allow us to live broken lives that we can give in service to you as part of your living body.

Jesus, bless our efforts, gifts and lives that we do give for your service, multiply our humble offerings to glorify your name, and Lord, give back to us by your grace, the abundance of your blessing.

The Lord's Supper

Here at the Covenant Church, we invite anyone who believes Jesus Christ is their Lord and Saviour to join us in Communion. Parents, you best know what your children believe, and we ask you to exercise some discernment. There is no pressure to participate, this is an opportunity to remember and celebrate our Lord Jesus Christ.

...

On the very night He was betrayed
Jesus took bread and gave You thanks
He broke it and gave it to His disciples,
"Take, eat, this is My body which is given to you;
do this in remembrance of Me."

In the same way, after supper
He took the cup and gave You thanks
He gave it to His disciples, saying,
"Drink this, all of you;
this is My blood of the new covenant,
which is shed for you and for many,
for the forgiveness of sins.
Do this as often as you drink it,
In remembrance of Me."

Feel free to stand and sing with us as we Celebrate our Salvation and the ability to commune with the Risen Lord.