

A Joyful Feast

Isaiah 25: 6-8, Luke 24: 28-35

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I grew up in a large, formal church in Memphis. In many ways, it was a wonderful church, full of people who taught me and loved me, forgave me when I made mistakes and modeled for me what living the Christian life is all about. But communion was another matter. In those days, that congregation celebrated communion only 4 times a year, to keep it special, they said, so that it doesn't become routine and rote and stale. But I'm not sure you could really say we "celebrated" communion: every time we had it, it felt like a funeral. The ushers were stiff and formal as they came walking up the center aisle, with serious, somber faces. The music was gloomy; we children dared not even crack a smile.

I know what they were thinking: they were commemorating Jesus' last supper with his disciples, on the evening he was betrayed by one of his closest friends, that last night before his grisly, painful, shameful death by crucifixion. So, in re-enacting the last supper, communion really was kind of like a funeral.

During Holy Week, it makes good sense to focus on that aspect of communion. It is good and right and appropriate to observe communion with reverence, and an appreciation of Christ's suffering on our behalf, and a gratitude for the depth of Christ's love for us.

AND there are other stories in the Bible that show us additional ways to think about communion. It doesn't have to feel like a funeral every single time.

Our New Testament reading today comes from the Gospel of Luke, where he tells the story of what happens on the afternoon and evening of that very first Easter Day. Two of Jesus' followers are walking the 7 miles from Jerusalem to a nearby town called Emmaus. They are heartbroken and confused, because their beloved leader is dead, the one they had thought would redeem Israel. As they walk along the road, the risen Christ comes near, and walks along with them, but the text tells us that "their eyes are kept from recognizing him." This "stranger", the incognito Jesus, asks them what they are talking about, and Cleopas and his companion proceed to tell him how their leader Jesus was condemned to death and crucified by the authorities; and how some women disciples are now saying that he is not dead, but alive. So, on this road to Emmaus, that someone called "this road of broken dreams", the incognito Jesus explains to them the Scriptures. But they still don't realize who he is.

So, I'll pick up reading what happens next, in Luke 24: 28-35:

As they came near the village to which they were going, the stranger walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with

them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and then he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, “The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!” Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Did you hear that? “He took bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to them.” It’s virtually the same words from the Last Supper! And in that moment, as he takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them, in that moment, their eyes are opened, and they recognize him! And they realize, only after the fact, that Jesus himself has been walking alongside them all afternoon. It seems to me that we are often like those early disciples, walking through life brokenhearted, confused, bereft of hope, at our wits end, not knowing which way to turn, walking down the “road of broken dreams”. This story opens up to us the idea that the risen Christ is walking alongside us too, through all the ups and downs of life, most of the time incognito. And the breaking of the bread gives us a particular opportunity to recognize the risen Christ in our midst. So, communion can be thought of not only as a funeral remembrance, but as an occasion to encounter the risen Christ. Jesus himself is present with us, in a tangible and yet mysterious way, in the breaking of the bread, even today.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke, meals are a hallmark: it seems that Jesus goes from one meal to the next. He eats with the outcast as well as with religious leaders, he feeds the multitudes, he tells multiple stories about banquets, he hosts a Passover meal. In these meals, we see how Jesus includes everybody, and values everybody. And in these meals, Jesus’ words and gestures are often similar, in a way that points to meals as holy encounters, even ordinary, everyday meals.

And the Gospel writer Luke continues this theme, in his second book, the book of Acts, sharing stories about the early church gathering for meals that become holy, meals that exhibit to the world the relationships of mutual support and encouragement across all socio-economic lines. These joyful occasions feed the early Christians, body and spirit; they share food with each other, they share their lives with each other, and it is all grounded in the presence of the living Christ in their midst.

Many of those early Christians are well aware of an Old Testament vision of the future, where God is depicted as the host of a great feast. According to this vision, at the end of time, all the peoples of the world are gathered at a sumptuous feast. The prophet Isaiah articulates this vision this way, in chapter 25: 6-8:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; God will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

This vision of the future is breath-taking: at this ultimate feast of the finest food and drink, everyone will have enough, and death will be no more, and God will wipe away all tears and sorrow and sadness. One interesting detail in this text that I had never noticed before: what is it that God is eating at this ultimate banquet? The text says that “God will swallow up death forever.” So, while “all peoples” are enjoying this amazing feast, God is “eating” the shroud of death that hangs over us all.

So, every time we celebrate communion, there’s a past component, a present component, and a future component, all here: there’s the remembrance of Jesus’ Last Supper with his disciples, there’s the recognition of the presence of Christ in this moment, and this holy meal points to God’s promise of a future feast, where all will be fed abundantly and joyfully, and death will be no more.

Over these past 16 months, we haven’t been able to gather for meals in the dining hall; we haven’t been able to celebrate communion in our usual way, with Nikki’s delicious homemade bread. I’ve heard several folks say wistfully, “We didn’t know how good we had it...” Without these meals, we’ve come to appreciate them even more; we see with new eyes the value of breaking bread together. We see with new eyes the holiness of breaking bread together, whether in the sanctuary, or the dining hall, or as we eat hot dogs together in the parking lot, as we eat sub sandwiches together at Walk in the Woods, and as we break bread anywhere else, with family or friends. Meals are holy, if only we have eyes to see. Life is holy, if only we have hearts to see.

And so as we celebrate communion this day, even with our less-than-good individual packets, communion can be reverent, filled with a sober gratitude for Christ’s love for us, AND communion can be a joyful celebration of Christ’s presence with us in this moment, AND communion can be an appetizer, a taste now of the great feast to come, when God will provide a glorious banquet for all peoples, and death will be no more. Thanks be to God!

6/6 sermon – Joyful Feast

Com-panis = with bread

Barbara at PTS

Koinonia -connectedness, enjoying bounty of God's provision of food,

Celebration – food! Christmas, birthday, graduation,

Communion – union with: connection with God, each other, in all times and places

And when we celebrate communion, it's helpful to remember all these other meals that Jesus participated in. sharing food can be holy.

And when the presence of God is tangible, we call that a sacrament. When we share food with others, God is there.

And that's the definition of a "sacrament" in the church: something that makes the presence of God visible and tangible, a visible sign of an invisible reality. A sacrament is a mystery that makes God's presence in the world visible; a sacrament is a symbol of God's overwhelming love and grace, poured out for us.

In early church, remembrance of past event, Jesus' last evening with disciples, but also associated memory of pleasant meals with him before his death, and post-resurrection appearances too. joyful reunion with living Christ.... present reality of Christ with them in breaking of bread. Not deny suffering, with us, on cross, but to remember the resurrected Christ.

This story describes a personal encounter, but it is more than that. It is also the story of the early Church, which knew Christ primarily in 2 ways: through the interpretation of Scripture and

through the breaking of the bread. These encounters with the risen Christ at group meals transformed a few discouraged Galileans into a world-wide movement.

Miss Daisy – tithed blackberry jam she made.

Ken Christy: we go from Eucharist in sanctuary to communion in dining hall... there's something decidedly holy about sharing a meal with others.

Meals are a hallmark in Luke: These meals evoke the longed-for gathering of Israel (Isaiah) and express the inclusive spirit of Jesus' own mission. Full revelation of who Jesus is and what his death and resurrection mean comes at the meal. J' words and gestures same as at the feeding of the multitudes and final Passover.

And embedded in the Last Supper is a tantalizing call: Jesus says, “as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, do so in remembrance of me.” How often do you think the people ate bread and drank wine in those days? I would think every day... So in this, Jesus points to the holiness of every meal, as a reminder of him in our midst each day.