

Communion

Luke 22:14-20 August 17, 2008

It's a sacrament – one of two most protestants recognize. The other being baptism as Jeff shared last week. Our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters recognize another five: confirmation, penance, extreme unction, ordination, and marriage. The reasons the reformers came to this position and it remains so for us is interesting and probably worthy of some time in one of our Adult Christian Education courses in the future, but we'll not be spending any time on that this morning.

We use several names when we reference it: Holy Communion, Communion, The Lord's Supper, The Last Supper, the Eucharist. It's been at the center of our worship for all of our nearly 2,000 years of history. And yet, and yet there are times when we go through the motions as if it were some meaningless ritual we have to tolerate.

But, then there are those times when we encounter in it the risen Christ himself and find our hearts strangely warmed, our guilt removed, at one with God and with those around us. Words alone cannot express what it means to us and the life of the church at such times. And yet, and yet we know we must try. So, here it goes.

In The Book of Discipline there is a section containing the beliefs of our former denominations. There we read about it being a sign of our love for one another, a sacrament of our redemption by Christ's death. There is also a strong statement about our rejection of transubstantiation – the idea that the bread and juice turn into the actual body and blood of Jesus.

Then there is a reference to our understanding of Christ's presence being real, but of a spiritual presence. That is followed by a note about Christ not worshiping the elements of the meal by carrying them around. And finally is a comment about the appropriateness of everyone receiving both the bread and cup.

It's referred to as a memorial – a token of the love we have with one another and with Christ.¹

United Methodists believe that Christ himself is mysteriously present in this meal of remembrance – not in the physical sense of transubstantiation, but really present. And because of that, because of Christ being present, what happens when we commune is different for each person who shares this wondrous meal because our needs are different each time we come and thus what this meal means is different each time and for each person.

One of the sermons I read this week really captured this thought for me by having listeners imagine the situations of a handful of persons who receive this holy meal on any given Sunday morning. I thought it safer to use this preacher's hypothetical illustrations than to start naming the variety of situations in our own community of faith.

He began by commenting on how, when he pictures communion, he thinks of people – you know, with big noses and fly away hair and wrinkles and birthmarks – each person unique and individual.

The first person he invited his congregation to picture was a lady with a scarf on her head – sort of like a baboushka, a Russian grandmother, or like a migrant worker. And then he noted that there was no hair under the scarf as a result of the chemotherapy she had undergone after her mastectomy.

He commented that as the minister stood in front of the woman and bent down to serve her, she reached up with her long thin fingers, one hand cradling the other to steady it, to receive the bit of bread he offered. He noted that all she heard was her name and “My body, broken for you,” as if she’d never heard the words before. And as she bit down alternately on the bread and her lower lip, the tears began to flow like a sudden summer shower.

Next he had his listeners imagine two pigtailed little girls about seven and eight. They giggled as they knelt there and looked down at the minister’s shoes and the one whispered, “See, I told you there was a penny in his shoe.” They were caught a little off-guard when the minister handed them their bread and juice. They flashed sweet smiles as if to both say “I’m sorry” and “thank you.” The minister smiled back the way ministers always do.

When the youngest one tasted the pasty bread she remembered the tuna fish sandwiches she and her parents and grandparents had enjoyed the day before at a picnic. She felt again the warm sunshine and secure feelings of being with her family.

As the older one chewed the bread while balancing the grape juice close to her nose ready to wash down the bread, she couldn’t help breathe in the sweet smell of the juice and it caused to race into her mind an image of the last day of school and the picnic and play day. She remembered the game of kickball and her first kick out of the infield and another girl kicking a home run thus allowing her to score. She remembered jumping up and down and cheering with her teammates because that ended the game. And then, both winners and losers, received a cup of grape juice from the coffee urn borrowed from the cafeteria. “The juice was warm, warm like the Communion grape juice, and the warmth seemed to add to its sweetness.”

Then the minister moved to a balding man with a big tin “turning forty” button on his collar. He had a salt-and-pepper mustache and wore an MIA bracelet on his wrist. He’d never been much of a churchgoer after his teen years. And after Vietnam he couldn’t force himself. It was too painful. And then he visited the Vietnam War Memorial Wall and at the age of thirty-seven he was able to return to church. And as so often, when the minister said, “My body, broken for you; my blood, shed for you,” he began to cry – tears of grief and sorrow, yes, but also cleansing tears of the gradual healing in his life.

Right beside him this minister noted knelt the man’s younger brother, weeping also. The two are different though. “This is my blood” caused the younger one to remember images of the Kent State slayings on the evening news, civil rights marches, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., people fighting against apartheid in South Africa. Nevertheless, he reached over and clasped his brother’s hand. At the Communion rail these two, these same and different brothers, bowed their heads and shared their grief.

The preacher then went on to describe that kneeling next to the brothers was an old lady who knew nothing of the brothers’ thoughts. Her grey hair was in a bun and her face was gullied with deep wrinkles. Her arthritis made kneeling difficult and so when the minister said, “My body broken,” the first she usually thought of was her knees. But this particular day – her mind went back to VE Day and VF Day when she toasted with her friends that the war was over and that husbands and lovers would be returning. There was a sense of God’s presence and hope.

Next to her the preacher noted might be a young mother rocking back and forth on her shins while holding her sleeping baby in her arms. The baby was peaceful unlike he was the week before when he was baptized and he squealed and squirmed and wet on the perspiring pastor. She cradled the baby on her forearm as Mary might

have cradled Jesus in the manger. As the minister handed her the bread and juice, all she heard was: “My body...for you.” And she recalled the pain of the birth, and yet the wonderful feeling afterwards that it was all worthwhile. “Unto us a child is born. My body...for you.” A wide, loving smile occupied her face.

Next to her the preacher imaged a man in his twenties with mongoloid features. His hair was in a crew-cut and he had a big grin on his face. He kept looking around like a curious child to see what everyone else was doing. And then, when the minister called him by name – “Charlie” – and handed him his very own bread and juice, well, that smile got even bigger. The words didn’t mean much to him – juice is juice and bread is bread – but it was obvious that he enjoyed being a part of something bigger than himself.

He really isn’t all that different than the widow who knelt beside him this preacher noted. She is thick and gray and smiled. Her husband had died the day after he retired five years before – the wound, although still fresh, was healing. She was akin to the mongoloid boy noted the minister because she too has felt “wrapped in the arms, the loving arms, of this body of Christ, this corpus of believers gathered in Jesus’ name. The fellowship, the being needed, the compassion and empowering love – they were just what she needed when she needed it most.”²

Yes, this is a memorial meal – this is a meal whereby we remember the saving acts of Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection. Yes, it is a sacred drama through which we are drawn close to God and to one another. Yes, it is a symbol – something physical, tangible that represents something spiritual and intangible – “an outward sign of an inward grace.” When we partake of this meal with our brothers and sisters in Christ we become aware that the past is part of the present – that the Jesus who lived 2,000 years ago is with us now. When we partake of this meal with our brothers and sisters in Christ we experience the wonders of God’s amazing grace.

Communion is a reminder that God is with us – now – and in all of the circumstances that make up our lives – individually and corporately. Communion is what happens when we get together in Christ’s name and share the bread and cup and we hear it said or say it ourselves: “This is my body, broken for you take, eat. This is my blood, shed for you; drink of it, all of you.”

The Invitation to Christian Discipleship this morning is an invitation to commune with me today – with one another – with the ever present Christ.

Today we are going to receive the elements of this holy meal by intinction. You are invited to come by the middle aisle or one of the outside aisles to the station closest to you and receive from one of the servers a piece of bread and then to go to the person holding a cup and touch the bread to the juice. You are then invited to return to your seats by way of the aisle on the opposite side of your pew. If you are unable to come forward to receive, there will be additional server teams moving among us to serve you.

Let me close with some additional words from the same sermon I referenced earlier: “Who knows how we will meet God in all this – in this ritual that is planned but allows for the unplanned, this meeting of the human spirit with the Holy Spirit of God? The experience may bring pain and pleasure, healing and forgiveness, a release from guilt and the strength to risk. Or it may bring simply a family-table feeling with a sense of being loved and cared for and part of something bigger. It may be a time to cast out fear and doubt, to be comforted as we walk through the Valley of the Shadow by the one who ‘walks with.’”³ Let us come prepared to receive that which we need this morning.

1. The Book of Discipline (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), pp. 64-68.
2. Steven E. Burt, Fingerprints on the Chalice (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 1990), 1-55673-217-1.
3. Ibid.