

Come to the Table

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

I remember the first time that I took communion. My childhood church practiced “open communion” in the sense that you didn’t need to be Baptized, but the expectation was that communion was only for those who had accepted Jesus Christ as their Saviour. Beyond that, when to start participating in the communion was up to the discretion of the person, or in my case of my parents. And I pleaded, oh how I pleaded, to be allowed to participate. I had accepted Jesus, what more was needed!? My mother held me off as long as possible, fearing that I didn’t really GET it, that I didn’t have a clear enough grasp on the meaning of the practice. Finally, probably around the time that I was 8 years old, she relented. I remember the shiny silver plate being passed down our pew, and I took the little square of white sandwich bread, and at the appropriate moment, popped the bread into my mouth. As we quietly chewed the squishy bread, I whispered to my mother, what I thought was a very funny joke. “This would taste better with peanut butter and jelly.” My mother, in fact, did not find my joke funny at all. The look on her face sobered me on the serious nature of communion. From that time forward, I remained as silent and stoic as the rest of the faithful in First Baptist Church. Closing my eyes, bowing my head, and silently confessing all my sins so that I could be worthy of the bread and grape juice. I wanted to make sure that I was doing communion ‘right’

A great deal of focus on Communion throughout Christian history has been about this question of doing it “right” or “properly”. In most traditions, there are rules and protocols about how and when someone can take communion, what words need to be said, how the bread and cup are to be served. Really, I was just bumping up against a lot of church history and culture when I made that not so funny joke to my mom.

One of the earliest things that people knew about Christians, about the early church is that they ate together regularly. This was practice that Jesus had given them, eating together, and they did so faithfully. If we stop and think about that, it's sort of wild in it's simplicity. How do you practice your religion? We eat together. Certainly it wasn't perfect, Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth reminded them about how to eat together in a way that was fair and loving. But the idea of meals being eaten together, as a practice of Christianity was central to the early church.

This all began to shift when the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the state. More imperial elements were added to the meal, and Communion became formalized and fixed. Communion was given at the altar by the priest, rather than around a family table. By the middle ages, many lay people only received the Eucharist once a year.

This all shifted, yet again, during the Protestant Reformation (around the same time that our Anabaptism was formed). Some reformers resented the hold that Priests had over the communion meal and returned to more of a “family style gathering”. Still others

shifted the focus away from the bread and the cup and put the emphasis on sermons/worship. In the present day, some churches take communion every Sunday and some may only do so twice a year. Sometimes plates are passed with the elements, sometimes people come to the front to receive, sometimes it's wafers, oyster crackers, gluten free-dairy free-bread. In my opinion, there isn't one right way to take communion.

The important thing is that we DO it. Because Jesus asked us to. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, Jesus did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do-specific ways of being together in their bodies- that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself...'Do this' he said- no believe this but do this- 'in remembrance of me'. I believe very strongly that there is something instructive, something sanctifying, some sacred about the communion meal. So, that's what we're going to talk about this morning. What the communion meal does for us and to us, and how that all points us back to Jesus. The one in whom all things have their beginning and the one in whom all things will have their completion.

First, let's talk about this idea of being worthy of communion. There was an unspoken expectation in my church growing up that you better get things right with the Lord and with your neighbour before you take communion. The time before the bread and cup were served was for private confession of all the ways I had failed. I have been told, and

I'm not sure how much truth there is to this, that Mennonites held communion very infrequently and with so much notice that people were expected to get their affairs in before they could receive communion. I was talking about this to Taylor, and he said, "If that's true, most people would need 10 years before they could have communion!"

But here is the shockingly gracious thing about communion—we're not worthy. We never have been, and don't ever need to come to the table of Jesus Christ. Jesus ate meals with sinners and tax collectors. The first institution of the communion, the last supper that Jesus ate with the disciples before his death, included the man who would betray him, Judas. He included Peter who would deny three times that ever knew Jesus. He included Thomas, the man who said he could not believe in the resurrection without proof. The table is a place of receiving grace in the form of bread and wine, for hungry, thirsty, needy bodies.

Alexander Schemann writes, "No one has been 'worthy' to receive communion. No one has been prepared for it. At this point all merits, all righteousness, all devotions disappear and dissolve. Life comes again to us a Gift, a free and divine gift...Everything is free, nothing is due and yet all is given. And, therefore, the greatest humility and obedience is to accept the gift, to say yes, in joy and gratitude."

I love that last line, therefore, the greatest humility and obedience is to accept the gift, to say yes, in joy and gratitude."

Nora Gallagher, in her book, *The Sacred Meal*, says, “If we did nothing else, if nothing was placed in our hands, we would have done two-thirds of what needed to be done. Which is to admit that we simply do not have all the answers, we simply do not have all the power.”

I remember the first time that I felt desperate at the communion table. It was back at our church in Manitoba, and the church had recently transitioned to holding communion every Sunday, rather than just once a month. There was a simple liturgy and prayer, and then we were invited to file through the center aisle, collect a piece of bread and a little dixie cup of grape juice from the plastic cart that the elements were laid on. Junia was a newborn, and we were drowning in new parenthood, and I was in the depths of postpartum depression. My own needs felt so overwhelming. I needed help, care, I needed wisdom on how to pass on this faith that was keeping me afloat to this little girl. I needed SLEEP. Mostly, I needed sleep. I had nothing to offer, nothing to bring, could do nothing, and what was given was Jesus. I was given grace, rest, sustenance in a Dixie Cup, and a promise that Jesus would be enough. This meal is enough, enough to meet the depth of my needs, the meal given by the one who promised to never leave me nor forsake me. It had to be enough.

Secondly, because Communion is a gift of grace, not earned, not awarded, that means all are welcome. And this posture of Jesus, this calling of “come to me all who you are weary and I will give you rest,” calls us into community with other needy, hungry people.

The sanctification, that is the slow, beautiful work of becoming more like Jesus happens at the communion table because we are in the company of other guests.

The Right Reverend Michael Curry tells the story of a young African-American couple that was dating in the 1940s. The woman was part of a more liturgical tradition that took communion every Sunday at the altar, while the man was from a Baptist church that passed a plate of elements down the pews. One Sunday, the young man agreed to accompany his girlfriend to church. As they began to worship, the young man realized that the two of them were the only Black people in the entire church; everyone else was white. When Communion time began, and the parishioners started filling up the aisle towards the altar, the young man realized that all the people were drinking from the same chalice. The priest would offer each person the cup to take a sip of wine, and then offer it to the next in the same way. This was America, in the 1940s. The young man had never seen black and white people drink from the same water fountain, let alone the same cup. As his girlfriend neared the altar, he watched nervously. The priest offered her a drink from the chalice, just as he had done for the person ahead, just as he would for the person behind her. The man decided that any church where black and white drank from the same cup had discovered something powerful, something he wanted to be a part of. That young couple was Bishop Curry's parents. Of communion Curry says, "it is a sacrament of unity that overcomes even the deepest estrangements between human beings."

When we come to communion as fellow guests of Jesus Christ, all of us needy, grace and reconciliation can flow, not because we have to get things right before we come to the table, rather things can be made right when we're awash in the mercy and love of Jesus Christ, offered at the table.

Rachel Held Evans, in her book, *Searching for Sunday*, writes, "On a given Sunday morning I might spot six or seven people who have wronged me or hurt me, people whose politics, theology or personalities drive me crazy. The church is positively crawling with people who don't deserve to be there...starting with me. But the table can transform even our enemies into companions. The table reminds us that, as brothers and sisters adopted into God's family and invited to God's banquet, we're stuck with each other; we're family. We might as well make peace. The table teaches us that faith isn't about being right or good or in agreement. Faith is about feeding and being fed."

Finally, there is something sacred, holy and even mysterious about communion. We live in a time and culture that values quantifiable, empirical evidence. If it cannot be seen or touched, studied or evaluated, then it simply isn't real. There is little room for mystery, for the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. Yet, I have seen how the table is a place where Jesus is revealed in ways that cannot be proven.

In Luke Chapter 24, a resurrected Jesus is walking along the road to Emmaus. He encounters two men who are deep in conversation. Jesus asks them, "What are you talking about?" The men, who do not recognize Jesus for who he is, tell him about the

events of the last several days- The Rabbi Jesus was crucified and died, and then, three days later, his body is gone. Some claim that he rose to life! Jesus begins to tell them the words of the prophets, and how all that happened aligned with Scriptures, with the promises that God made. The men are amazed at all this stranger tells them. When they arrive at the home of one of the men, they urge Jesus to stay for supper, as it was getting late. Starting in verse 30 of chapter 24, "When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

What makes this story so beautiful to me is that they didn't recognize Jesus as he explained the scriptures to them, as he told the story of the prophets, they recognized him at the table, at the meal he was praying over, in the breaking of the bread.

Emily Scott, a Pastor in New York City hosts a somewhat unconventional communion meal every week. The church makes delicious food and opens the doors to anyone who wishes to take part. Church members. Homeless people. Retail employees from the neighborhood. You're hungry? For food? For Jesus? C'mon in. "We do church this way", she says, "because people are looking for Jesus. People are looking for Jesus and

thinking that just maybe they see him, but then again maybe not. But when we sit down together and break bread, we glimpse him for a moment in one another's eyes and say to each other, 'I see Christ at this table; I see him when we sit down together and eat.'

Friends, I see Christ in this room. I see Christ in each and everyone of you. In your stories. In your actions. In your desire to love Jesus and this church. In each of our needy hearts and souls, Jesus is there. What a profound, beautiful mystery.