

“The Institution of Communion”

Mark 14:22-26 (NRSV)

There were times in the ministries of the prophets of old when words weren't adequate to make their point, **so they resorted to dramatic, symbolic actions**. For example, on one occasion, **Jeremiah** took his audience with him to visit **a potter's house** and considered how like a pot, made from scratch, God works and reworks his people (18:1-11), and even when the pot had to be broken because it wasn't good enough, God can start all over (19:1-13). On another occasion, he made **a yoke** and wore it to prophesy the Babylonian Captivity (27:1-7).

So, too, **Ezekiel** once drew **a picture of the city of Jerusalem on a clay brick** and then erected a miniature enemy camp and siege works against it (4:1-3) – it was just as if he was playing with toys! -- as a sign of the siege that was coming. On another occasion, **he had the hair on his head and beard shaved** (an outrageous act in the Hebrew culture of his day), and then proceeded to divide the hair into three mounds. The first he burned, the second he struck with a sword, and the third he scattered to the wind, to prophesy the future national chaos that would ensue (5:1-3). Few agreed with the prophecy, but no one forgot the bald prophet's message.

This is why **Jesus, the ultimate prophet of Israel, was in profound continuity with prophetic practice** when, during the celebration of the Passover meal with his disciples, **he dramatically reinterpreted it and instituted a radical new observance for his followers**. Jesus combined various elements of the meal on the table with his words to maximize the communication of a most important truth for humankind.

When the meal had been completely laid out before them, **Jesus would have explained the meaning of the foods and the drink on the table**. For example, **the bitter herbs** would recall their ancient slavery in Egypt and, could now symbolize the oppression they suffered under the Romans. **The lamb**, properly bled, and served roasted, as the main item on the menu, must have brought to their remembrance the efficacy of the lamb's sacrificial blood applied to the doorposts of their houses in Egypt, as the angel of death passed over them, even while it destroyed the firstborn of their enemies. The lamb's protein, too, would sustain them during their hasty escape. And **the cups of wine** would have been lifted and emptied in celebration of God's goodness and graciousness as seen in their eventual, miraculous freedom.

We don't have a detailed record of the words of Jesus' explanation, but we believe that **what he said that night went beyond any words ever prescribed and given before this time**. It would've prepared Christ's disciples for the words that are to be used at every celebration of the institution of what later came to be called the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, or Holy Communion.

With the explanation of the Passover meal completed, Jesus, as the presiding rabbi and family head, sat erect from his reclining position, **broke off some pieces of the unleavened bread**, and pronounced a blessing: **"Praise be to you, O Lord, sovereign of the world, who causes bread to come forth from the earth,"** to which the disciples would have responded **"Amen!"** (William L. Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 1975, p. 505, quoting Mishna Berachoth, 6.1). **Jesus then passed on the pieces of bread**, which were **distributed in silence** from hand to hand to all who were seated around the hollow square of the table. During this silence, Jesus shattered the Passover custom with his radical words recorded in Mark's Gospel: **"Take; this is my body"** (14:22b).

With this, **the disciples began to soberly, silently eat the sacred bits of bread**. The earlier prediction of intimate betrayal, and now Jesus' astounding command, must have left them **totally incapable of levity**. The silence was birthing an imperfect but ascending comprehension that would quickly mature in the events to come.

When this was completed, Jesus rose again from his reclining position and repeated the traditional charge: **"Speak praises to our God, to whom belongs what we have eaten."** The disciples would have responded, **"Praise be to God for the food we have eaten."** (This reminds me of the way my family used to pray before and after each meal until, as teenagers, we suggested one prayer was enough!)

Then with his right hand, Jesus lifted **the third cup of red wine**, and gazing upon it, gave thanks:

May the all-merciful One make us worthy of the days of the Messiah, and of the life of the world to come. God brings salvation of his king. God shows covenant-faithfulness to his anointed, and to David and his seed forever. God makes peace in his heavenly places. May God secure peace for us and for all Israel. And everyone said, "Amen!"

Then in silence, Jesus passed the common cup to his disciples, with these words: **“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many”** (14:24).

There was **prophetic continuity in Jesus’ graphic use of the bread and the cup**, normally used in the Passover meal, **as new signs of the spiritual freedom from sin and death that he would bestow**. The apostle Paul would later tell us in his First Letter to the Corinthians that **Jesus instituted this observance as a “remembrance” of himself** (1 Cor. 11:24-25). It was meant to convey to all an increasing understanding of the mystery of Christ’s incarnation and atonement. Therefore, we ought always to keep in mind that the Lord’s Table is **an acted parable** and to consider what we are proclaiming through the parable. Paul puts it this way: **“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup you proclaim [‘show forth’ KJV] the Lord’s death until he comes”** (1 Cor. 11:26). Much as Jews observe past, present and future at the Passover meal, we find ourselves looking back and looking forward. We reverently remember Jesus’ death and what it accomplished; and, we celebrate Jesus’ second coming and what it promises.

1. The meaning of the broken bread (Mark 14:22).

What do Jesus’ words, “Take; this is my body” (14:22), mean? To begin with, **Jesus wasn’t saying that the bread was literally his body**. Perhaps you know that Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine are **literally** turned into Jesus’ body and blood in the mass (the doctrine of transubstantiation). But the Jewish context, with its prophetic legacy of parabolic acts and language understood that Christ was speaking **in picture language**; he was using **the language of metaphor**.

What picture then was Jesus trying to portray? In a word, the bread referred to **his life**. In the Incarnation at Bethlehem (literally, the town of bread), Jesus Christ, who described himself as **“the bread of life”** (Jn. 6:35, 38) and **“the living bread that came down from heaven”** (Jn. 6:51), took on a human body. He demonstrated his divine life to the world by living a sinless life in a **fragile, mortal, and human body**. He suffered and died as we suffer and die. But he triumphed over the grave as **his body was raised back to life**, and he now lives in a **glorified body** at the right hand of the Father where he prays for us.

As the gathered community of “the body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27), we are privileged to share in that life. That’s why the apostle Paul said, “The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16).

Thus, in the broken bread we see Jesus Christ’s human incarnation, suffering, death and resurrection life, and our partaking of it symbolizes **our real participation in his life**. If we are believers, **we are partaking in the life of Christ**. This is what the broken bread means to us.

The bread also means that **we participate in each other’s lives**. Paul goes on to say in his commentary on the meaning of communion, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). Therefore, in addition to underscoring our participation in Christ’s life, there is evidenced in Communion **our commitment to and actual, compassionate sharing in each other’s lives**. That is why we sometimes call the Lord’s Supper: Holy Communion. It is communion with God, through Christ and it is communion with one another. **We meet and greet one another in the broken bread.**

Jesus had already told his disciples sometime before celebrating this meal, that if in the act of coming to worship, people remembered “that [their] brother or sister [had] something against [them, they needed to] leave [their] gift at the altar and go; [to] be first reconciled to [their] brother or sister, and then come and offer their gift” (Matt. 5:23-24). So also, Paul said that a very important aspect of **participating in communion is not just found in the personal meditation and reflection** in which one engages, **but also in the corporate discernment and community that one practices** (1 Cor. 11:27-34a). Communion without reconciliation is a contradiction in terms.

So what are we announcing to the world as we partake of “the bread that is broken” for us (1 Cor. 11:24): that **we are partakers in the real life of Christ** and that **we are partakers in the life of the church community**. There is **something organic, something life-giving**, in the bread that is shared around this Table. Our partaking is not only an announcement, but an invitation to partake. It is meant to make those around us hungry for this little bit of bread.

2. The meaning of the outpoured cup (Mark14:23-24).

And **what was the meaning of Christ's pronouncement about the cup** from which all of the disciples drank: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (14:23-24)? **The redness of the wine (or grape juice!) in the cup represented Jesus' atoning, life-giving blood.** And the reference to being "**poured out for many**" is an allusion to the prophet Isaiah's words that spoke of the Messiah as being **one who "poured out his life unto death"** (Isa. 53). This described a voluntary, violent death, not unlike our Lord's death upon the cross. Further, "**for many**" indicated **those who would benefit from that terrible, yet atoning death.**

Jesus Christ's blood is the "blood of the new covenant" (cf. 1 Cor. 11:25), a "new covenant ... [written on people's] hearts" (Jer. 31:31-34). **The price paid for the forgiveness** brought about by the old covenant **was symbolized by the shedding of the sacrificial blood of animals** (Exod. 24:6-8). Sacrifice speaks of "the exchanged life" – life is given up so that others may live. Grain becomes flour and, in turn, it becomes bread. Animals, birds and fish give us their meat so we may have protein. Now, Christ's blood seals the new covenant, wherein men, women, young people, and children are saved by faith in his atoning work.

With the bones of the Passover lamb on the plates in front of the disciples, and the aroma of the roasted lamb's sacrifice still in the air, Jesus' words and actions confirmed John the Baptist's earlier declaration that he was indeed, "**The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**" (Jn. 1:29).

Again, the wine or juice in the cup is **not meant to actually be the blood of our Lord**; yet, **the life-giving drink from the cup's contents is meant to drive home** to us who believe **the objective fact of our redemption** as we partake and share fellowship in the blood of Christ. When we partake with reverence, God's Holy Spirit makes what happens real to us. As an ancient North African bishop, **Augustine** once wisely said, "**Communion makes visible to us what the gospel's proclamation can only make verbal.**" In communion, we not only hear, but we can also see, smell, touch, and taste the gospel! The gospel assures us of God's love and forgiveness. Hence, as we take the cup we will benefit most by saying in our hearts, "Yes, I am really accepted and forgiven!"

3. The broken bread and the outpoured cup's demand (John 6:53-56).

Let's also not forget the reality that **these symbols** so powerfully portray **makes exacting demands upon us in regard to the depth of our belief.** Earlier in Jesus' ministry in his discourse on "the bread of life" gave us one more of his "hard" or difficult sayings," undoubtedly anticipating the Lord's Table:

Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal; life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.

(Jn. 6:6:53-56)

Unless you're a young person and into the latest round of heart-throb **Robert Pattison** vampire movies, **this must all sound rather gruesome.** Indeed, quoting just such passages, **Romans accused the early Christians of cannibalism!**

But, again, **Jesus was speaking figuratively.** As **St. Augustine** commented: "Crede, et manducasti" – "**Believe and you have eaten.**" The emphasis he was trying to make was that enjoying eternal life (not later, but here and now) involves **partaking in his life by faith**, which can best be understood by the metaphor of ingesting his body and drinking his blood.

As the hymnwriter, **Bernard of Clairvaux**, sang.

Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts,
Thou fount of life, thou light of all,
From the best bliss that life imparts
We turn unfilled to Thee again.

Thy truth unchanged hath ever stood
Those savest those that on thee call
To them that seek thee thou are good,
To them that find thee all in all.

We taste thee o thou living bread,
And long to feast upon thee still;
We drink of thee, the fountainhead,
And thirst our souls from thee to fill.

We must truly feed on Christ or there is no life, regardless of what we say. We must spend time with Jesus. We must learn from Jesus. The metaphor tells us that Christ is absolutely indispensable. Food and drink are essential. Bread and wine were staples of life in those days. Spiritually, it is impossible to live without Christ. He is our bread and our drink, our everything.

Dr. Charles Malik, one-time Lebanese Secretary-General of the United Nations, and a Christian, once proclaimed from the steps of Wheaton College, in Illinois, “I can live without food, without drink, without sleep, without air, but I cannot live without Jesus.” That is what the Church proclaims.

Through the Lord’s institution of the Lord’s Table, or Holy Communion, we proclaim the following: **our sin**, through the redemptive sacrifice of Christ’s life upon the cross, **is forgiven**; **our faith is secured** by Christ’s incarnation, passion and resurrection; **and our future is assured** in Christ’s promise that he will come again, for he said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new [and the implication is, with his disciples, with you and with me] in the kingdom of God” (14:25).

Friends, **Holy Communion and the Messianic Banquet await us!**

Let us celebrate with reverence and with joy!

Amen

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