

THE CHURCH'S THANKSGIVING DINNER

Practicing (for) the Kingdom: Eucharist

Matthew 26:20-30

When I think about the practice of the Lord's Supper in the church,
two thoughts come to mind.

These two thoughts contradict each other,
but they are both true.

First thought:

The Church has made way too big a deal out of the Lord's Supper.

Second thought:

The Church needs to make a much bigger deal
out of the Lord's Supper.

In many church traditions,
both of these statements are true at the same time.

Let me start with the ways I think the church has made too big a deal.

We heard the scripture from Matthew 26,
about how the Lord's Supper tradition began.
Jesus and his disciples were sitting around a table.
Friends having a special meal together.
After the meal, Jesus took two things in his hand—
ordinary things that were on every dinner table—
bread and wine.

Jesus took these ordinary sources of nourishment
blessed them, shared them around the table,
and used them to make a dramatic point,
saying they represented his body and blood
which were about to be offered up in a supreme sacrifice.

He then asked his followers to keep this up as a normal practice,
whenever they shared bread and wine together
in a circle of his friends and followers,
to remember him, and what his life and death meant.

And that's *exactly* what the early Jesus-followers did.
They "broke bread together with glad and generous hearts"

according to Acts 2.

And many times *elsewhere* in Acts, and the epistles,
we see evidence that this sharing of the bread and cup
took place often, even *daily*,
as the Common Meal was shared in their homes
and gathering places.

My, how far we've come.

To the point that, at least in *some* traditions,
and at some points in church history,
this ordinary remembering of Jesus at the table,
at a meal, in intimate community,
became such a high and holy and mysterious ritual,
that it could *only* be done
under the most controlled circumstances,
administered *only* by duly ordained
and properly robed clergy,
using specially-blessed tiny tasteless wafers
laid out on a gold platter,
and ritually-consecrated wine
poured into an ornate jewel-studded chalice.
The wine was considered *so* holy and sacred
that for many centuries only the ordained clergy
were *allowed* to drink from the cup,
lest some of this holy wine
that had mysteriously *become* the blood of Jesus
might accidentally dribble down someone's chin
and fall on the floor.

In my humble opinion, that's making way too much
out of something that was supposed to be
an ordinary celebrative common meal,
with bread and wine shared around the table to remember Jesus.

We might say, well, thank God for the Reformation.
And rightly *so*.
Some important, and good, changes happened
in recent centuries of church history.

We Anabaptists trace our roots back to Zurich, Switzerland,
to George Blaurock, Conrad Grebel, and Felix Manz.
Their pastor and mentor was the Reformer Ulrich Zwingli.
Zwingli was the first to make a radical change in the practice.
He replaced the gold platters and chalices,
with ordinary wooden plates and cups.
And he had the congregation sit down at tables together,
and after reading the pertinent scriptures in German
he prayed a blessing,
and everyone shared the bread and wine together at tables.
Pretty *radical*.

But of course, as time rolls on,
simple things usually grow more complicated.
And even with Anabaptist-Mennonites
and other streams of the Believers' Church,
the practice of communion got pretty far away
from the notion of a shared common meal.
When I was growing up,
it never would have occurred to me to even *use* the word "meal"
in connection with "the Lord's Supper."
Whether the common cup, or tiny glass cup,
we *never* drank from *anything* like that at home.
And those tiny bits of white Wonder Bread.
I remember helping my mother, the pastor's wife,
prepare them at home by stacking the Wonder bread,
cutting off the crusts, and slicing it into miniature cubes.
Even the *bread* didn't look or taste like real food.
It wasn't a meal in *any* sense I could see.
It was just a solemn religious ritual.

And in my early church experience,
communion was served *only* by the bishop.
The occasion was somber.
It was shrouded in an air of . . . well, almost a foreboding.
At least that's how I *remember* it feeling as an adolescent.
Maybe that's because we made such a big deal about
"being worthy" to receive communion.
And "being worthy" meant, at the *least*,

having no sin unconfessed and unforgiven.
But actually, it felt *more* like it meant
having achieved a state of moral purity.
Communion Sunday was preceded, one week *earlier*,
by Preparatory Sunday.
That's when every member was examined, one-by-one,
by the minister, or deacon, or bishop,
and we were asked to declare that there was nothing in our lives
that would make us unworthy to receive communion.

Of course, with all the time and effort we put into this ritual,
we didn't do it more than once or twice a year.
We couldn't have!

So it makes me at least ask the question, whether we *too*
have sometimes made too big a deal of the Lord's Supper.

Pre-Reformation, Post-Reformation,
High Church, Low Church—
we all moved pretty far away from
the Lord's Supper as community meal.
I have to at least wonder what the church lost,
by making this joyful meal of remembrance
that began as an ordinary and earthy and frequent practice
of Christians living in intimate community with each other,
into this coded ritual that seems mysterious, mystical, and elitist,
or at least *very* concerned with maintaining church purity.

And I wonder what it would look like for us to recover
at least *some* of the character of its early practice.

And here's where I say, in order to *recover* some of its early character,
we need to make a bigger deal out of the Lord's Supper.
But bigger, in a different sense.

Not in terms of elevating the ritual
to something so high and holy and inaccessible.
But a bigger deal, in the sense of making the Lord's Supper

central to our life of shared worship and community.
Central and frequent.

I think we need to restore its fuller meaning and richer experience.
The Lord's Supper can be a highly formational practice
of Christian communal worship when we engage in it
frequently and deliberately.

It's a way to regularly bring the sacred into the ordinary,
and to make our encounter with the risen Christ
more than an intellectual exercise,
but a wholistic, tangible, incarnational,
act of worship that involves our beings—
mind, spirit, emotions, and relationships—
reinforced by a full-bodied sensory experience.

I began this series by saying when we engage regularly
in the practices of Christian worship
we shape our desires toward God's vision of human flourishing—
life in the Kingdom of peace, of justice,
of righteousness, of shalom.

This is in *contrast* to how our desires right *now*
are being shaped by secular and cultural liturgies
of consumerism, individualism, and materialism,
to name just a few.

I said that becoming the people God created us to be
requires *more* than making a rational decision to do so.
We cannot just think our way into living differently.
We need to re-shape our desires.
And desires are shaped by practices.
So we need the full range of practices of Christian worship
to re-shape our desires.
Take a look at the poster out in foyer to remind yourself
of all the practices we've looked at in this series.
Practices that are embodied, that are wholistic,
that engage our spirits, emotions, and bodies,
as *well* as our minds.

This is nowhere more true than in the Eucharist.

Now, this is the first time in the sermon I used the word Eucharist.
Intentionally.

We Mennonites generally prefer the word communion,
because we associate Eucharist with high-church practice.
But Eucharist is not a high-church word. It's a Bible word.

It's Greek for "give thanks."
We heard the word this morning, when Matt. 26 was read:
"While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread,
and after he *eucharistēsas* (gave thanks), he broke it,
gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat. This is my body.'"

I think we'll understand communion better
if we remember that it was a real meal, for which they gave thanks.
A Eucharistic Meal is, literally, a Thanksgiving Dinner.

What if we approached Communion like we approach Thanksgiving?
Getting together as family,
to remember and celebrate and give thanks,
for all that God has done for us, as family.
A time to remember, to tell stories, to give witness.
To thank God and enjoy each other.

Communion is the Church's Thanksgiving Dinner,
intended to nourish both body and soul.
Communion is deep nourishment.

So why do we want to limit such nourishment
to a few times a year?
Or why would we shrink it down into a tiny tasteless wafer?

Eating the bread and drinking the cup
is one of the few times in worship we get to engage all five senses.
99% of the time we *only* use our sense of hearing and seeing.
Rarely do we encounter Christ in worship,
with the more tangible, visceral senses of touch, taste, and smell.

In our larger culture we are *constantly* fed
one sensory experience after another.
Speaking of needing our desires reshaped.

Our desires are being shaped daily by culture
every time we turn on our TV, computer, or smart phone,
every time we stop at Klines or bite into a Big Mac,
every time we walk down the Valley Mall corridor and get hit by
the smells floating out of Bath & Body Works and
larger-than-life posters at the front of Victoria's Secret,
every time we attend or watch a major sporting event,
every time we have movie night in our home theater.

This, of course, is what we *want*.
It's what we crave—better, deeper, richer sensory experiences.
Many of us go to amazing efforts and great expense
to enhance our sensory experiences at home.
Surround sound, high-definition, now *3-D* television.
Beautiful art on the walls, quality music collection.
Potpourri, incense, hot-tubs, plush furniture,
bread baking in the oven.

I'm not being critical at *all*.
It's a God-ordained desire in us.
God *created* us to have good, strong, positive sensory experiences—
whether walking in the woods in autumn,
or, my personal favorite,
holding and sipping a mug of freshly-roasted coffee.
To be human, is to be drawn to experience the world around us
through our senses.

Of course, our culture has always known that desire is shaped
by sensory experiences.
All the major arenas in our culture—
entertainment, sports, food, merchandise, politics—
they *all* know, if they want us to change our behaviors
to participate in what they have to offer—
they must engage us at the level of desire.

How many times have you seen a car commercial,
or prescription drug ad,
that made you feel or desire something,
but didn't tell you one bit of helpful information
about the car or drug.
Cars, and medicine, are both pretty complicated.
Information is *critical*
to knowing what *kind* of car or medicine we need.

There was one prescription drug ad I saw at least a dozen times,
and I *still* didn't have the foggiest idea what the drug was for.
Was it for depression, diabetes, osteoporosis, allergies, or ED?
I had no idea.
I was just supposed to ask my doctor whether I needed that drug.
Not because I knew what was wrong with me,
but because by taking that drug I could take
pleasant walks in a flowering meadow, by a rippling brook,
hand-in-hand with my loved one, the world at peace.
They weren't giving me information.
They were shaping my desire.
Because they *knew* that's what they needed to do,
if they want me act differently, to become a customer.

Why should the church think we have a *better* chance
at shaping persons into disciples of Jesus,
by appealing only to our rational faculties?

That was basically the argument, in the church of my childhood,
for *not* celebrating communion too often.
The fear is that if we do it more than twice a year,
we'll forget what it's really about.
That we'll stop thinking about its meaning.
But that's assuming communion is only significant
by what it makes us think about, rationally and intellectually.

We need to take a new look
at what it could mean for our life as a disciple community,
if we engaged in a fuller, richer, more sensory, and more frequent
practice of sitting together at the Lord's Table

and being nourished in both body and soul.

How might it shape our desires to be fed in *other* ways
by the sacrificial life of Jesus represented in the bread and cup?

How might these regular, tangible, visceral reminders
of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus,
help us open ourselves *more*

to God's healing, saving, and redeeming work *today*?

How might it shape a deeper desire to seek God's saving grace,
as we try to navigate in a world of suffering and brokenness?

The Eucharistic Meal, the Thanksgiving Dinner of the Church,
was clearly at the center of the life of the early church.

Is there any good reason for us today,
to keep this meal at the periphery?

Okay, maybe we won't start having it every Sunday here
in our large worship gathering,
although I think I could make a good case to *consider* doing so.

But why don't we have it more often,
in the smaller, more intimate circles in which we gather?

Does your Sunday School class
break bread and drink the cup when you gather in a circle,
to remember the Jesus you seek to follow?

And *if* not, *why* not?

Does your small group, while you're already gathered for a meal,
with bread and wine, or juice, on the table
take the opportunity to put a little more significance
into breaking that bread, and drinking from that cup,
remembering Jesus Christ who is present
and at the center of your gathering?

If not, *why* not?

No matter what church tradition says,
Jesus never said it takes a robed clergy-person
to administer the elements.

Jesus never gave his disciples magic words
to pronounce when serving the bread and cup.

He just said,

“Whenever you eat this bread, and drink this cup,
remember me.”

Can't we simply *do* that?

And do it often, and everywhere we gather?

Or . . . to get even *more* radical, and more simple . . .

what prevents a gathering of believers
going out to eat at Cally's or Ruby Tuesday or Little Grill,
when everyone has in front of them

a piece of bread and a cup (no matter what's *in* it),
for someone to simply say,

without any fancy planning or magic words,

“Let's remember Jesus.”

Then silently, wordlessly, prayerfully

eating the bread together,

sipping from the cup together.

Even people at the next table wouldn't notice what's going on,
but you'd be having communion.

You think that's too radical?

I think it's pretty close to how things happened in the early church.
Except they ate in homes instead of restaurants.

I can't get Jesus' words out of my mind:

“*Every time* you eat this bread or drink this cup.”

I think Jesus *meant* that.

And I think Jesus knew how formational
such a regular practice would be.

I invite us to actively look for ways
to bring the church's Thanksgiving Dinner
back into the regular rhythm of our lives.

We are soon going to have this Thanksgiving Dinner *here*.

I challenge us all to think of a way to have it again

this coming week, or next,

with one of the smaller communities you are part of.

—Phil Kniss, February 27, 2011