

This Is My Body

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October 1, 2017

1 Corinthians 11:20-26 — When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry, and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a piece of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

So, when you and I do this thing we call Communion, or the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist, what exactly are we doing? What's happening at this table? We know that this ritual is important for our faith tradition, we know that it's supposed to matter to us, but why? We could easily have a lecture this morning, a time of teaching and transmitting information about this 2,000 year old Christian ritual. And there will be a time for that, I imagine, but that's not what I want to do this morning. Instead, I just want to share two stories about this ritual, two stories about how Communion has nourished me and people who are close to me over the years.

I remember the first time that Communion *really* mattered to me, the first time it became a precious part of my spiritual life. I was in college, attending a small, non-denominational church, where there were a lot of other college students and a lot of refugees from around the world. This church met in an elementary school's gym, with a large circle of fold-up chairs all facing inward, towards a table. Each week, the pastor would preach from the center of that circle, walking around the table over the course of his sermon. And each week, after the sermon, he invited everyone in the congregation to come to the table themselves and receive Communion. Having grown up Baptist, I had never before been in a church that served the sacrament every week. Often, the pastor introduced the ritual by saying, "We don't know what all is happening here at this table, but we do know that when we come to it, Christ meets us here." In this church's circle of chairs, there were four aisles, and when the time came for Communion, the congregation would stand and form four lines in these aisles, approaching the table from north, south, east, and west. Each week, as I stood in line and slowly made my way to the table, I would be surrounded by people from all walks of life—fellow college students, single moms holding their babies, 70-year-old refugees from Ethiopia. For three years, I took part in this communal experience every week, and more often than not, it moved me to tears.

The first time that happened, it surprised me—I had never cried over the sacrament before attending this church. But something about that setting struck a chord in me, again and again. When I was surrounded by that diverse group of people, and when I started thinking about all of the people who I was sharing this sacred mystery with, Christ struck a new chord in me. Friends, today is World Communion Sunday, which means today we remind ourselves that we share this sacrament not just with the people here in this sanctuary, but with children of God all over the world, from every imaginable walk of life. In Communion, Christ doesn't just meet *us*; Christ meets the world. And so, when we receive this sacrament, we are communing not just with Christ, but with the world as well.

A second story: My friend Carl is training to be a priest in the Episcopal Church, and whenever he talks about his call to ministry, Carl tells a story about his most meaningful experience of Communion. He was in France, at a monastic community called Taizé (which some of you have heard of). One evening there, Carl attended a service where many people with disabilities were present. When the time came for the sacrament, the two priests went from pew to pew, bringing the bread and wine to the worshippers and serving them where they were. Carl was sitting in one of the back pews, on the left. During the service, he had noticed a young man in a back pew on the right. This young man was non-verbal, and throughout the service, involuntary tremors traveled through his arms and much of his body. He had an aide on either side of him, and these aides controlled his body's movement, tried to bring some order to his body's chaos. As the priests brought the bread and wine to the back right pew, the young man made it clear, through his non-verbal communication, that he wanted to stand up to receive the sacrament. Once the two aides understood what he wanted, they looked surprised, unsure, and reluctant. They turned to the head priest, who nodded, giving them permission to stand.

So, in this narrow pew, the aides awkwardly stood and pulled up this young man, so that he could receive Communion standing up. The head priest looked at the young man with compassion and spoke the words of institution with warmth and earnestness. The young man could not hold the bread in his shaky hands, so after the priest ripped off a piece, he reached out his arm and placed the bread in this young man's mouth, and in that second, the young man's body trembled, and the bread fell out of his mouth and onto the floor. The assistant priest, who was holding the cup of wine, gasped. This bread had just been proclaimed to be the body of Christ, and he was appalled to see it dropped on the dirty ground. But the head priest, Carl noticed, didn't skip a beat. With the same compassion and warmth and earnestness, he simply reached back to the bread, ripped off another piece, repeated the words of institution, and, with a smile, tried again. As this was happening, Carl stared into the eyes of the head priest, and it was as if he heard the priest say, "I could do this all day."

A while later, Carl heard something else in his head—a question, a fear: "Would anyone do that for me? If I had tremors running through my body; if I couldn't communicate with words like everyone else does; if I couldn't go anywhere on my own and could barely move my body without the help of two people; if that was me, and I wanted to stand to receive the sacrament, would anyone show me compassion? Even if it took all day? Carl is a Ph.D. student at Princeton

University, and in a couple of weeks he's getting married. He is young, intelligent, creative, healthy, beautiful, well-liked, and well-loved. And yet, he knows just how fragile life is. He knows that he or anyone of us here could become just like that young man tomorrow. And knowing this, that question, that fear, has stuck with him long after that evening service at Taizé. What if this or that awful thing happened to me? Would I be cared for unconditionally? Would I be loved no matter what? *Am* I loved, right now, no matter what?

In a letter to the church in Rome, the apostle Paul asks, "What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or lack of food, or lack of clothing, or danger, or violence? ... No," he answers, "in all of these things, we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us." Friends, I'm assuming that you are like Carl and like me, and you know those kinds of questions and fears all too well. And for me, this ritual of Communion is a powerful response to them. When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we remind ourselves that the God of the universe is so in love with this fearful, wounded world, that God took on the fragile life of flesh and entered into our world in the person of Christ, giving us God's own self. And when our fearful world turned its back on him, God gave *up* God's own self, to the point of death. What greater love could there be? And when we receive this sacrament—when we touch and taste these sacred elements, when we take them into our sacred bodies—we are reminding ourselves that this love, God's love, is *for us*. And for the world. This table has so much to teach us, friends. Together, let us keep learning from it and let it keep nourishing us. Amen.