
Luke 24: 28-35

The Breaking of the Bread- A Sermon on Communion

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Rev. Susan Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

If you have ever been to Rome one of the biggest tourist attraction is the catacombs. Set far outside the city limits on the outskirts of everything, these ancient burial grounds run tours in multiple languages every hour all day long. Though they attract crowds of people from around the world, in many ways the catacombs are quite unremarkable in some ways. Mostly the tour consists of a long trek through underground tunnels. As you walk along you can see that the sides of each wall are filled with 5-6 feet of horizontal underground graves stacked one on top of the other. But the real attraction in this place and the reason for going at all is that throughout these tunnels people have discovered underground rooms- small to medium in size. They are spare rooms with one long table at each end. The walls are decorated with crumbling ancient paintings of Jesus. The first depictions of Jesus Christ known to us, have been preserved underground in these cave-like rooms. Here we see Jesus portrayed as a shepherd with a lamb over his shoulder. Before him is a table with an old pottery plate and one lone chalice. This pottery is a modern addition to re-create the ancient scene.

The reason people flock out to the catacombs by the thousands is to see the place where the earliest followers of Jesus would gather, often in secret, to share a meal. That experience which formed the pre-cursor for our Sacrament of Communion was so powerful for that first generation of disciples that they risked a lot to break bread together. They came to these illegal gatherings in a graveyard because they found their faith strengthened through this ritual meal.

This month our topic for worship is Rites and Sacraments. So each week we will examine another high point in the worship season. Today we will look at our monthly practice of communion and talk about what it means. Next week I will explain the Sacrament of Baptism and how the fact of our baptism has a transformative impact on our everyday life. Then on Jan. 20 Rev. Jamie will talk about Confirmation. She is passionate about confirmation. Rev. Jamie wrote her senior thesis at Harvard Divinity School on Confirmation and created a new curriculum for confirmation, which she used in her last church. On the last Sunday of January we will talk about Church Membership, and I will share our vision for this church.

The Sacrament of Communion means different things to different people. For some it is a comforting ritual which they remember from childhood. For others it is a cherished tradition which they want to share with their own children. For others, communion is a time in the service when we become less passive and get up out of their seats and take a step toward God- move up to the altar, or take some action. For others it gives time to pray while the choir sings. But the question remains; **What do we believe about Communion? Why is it sacred? Why was it such a cherished tradition for 2000 years now? What difference does communion make in our lives today?**

In the first place communion remains a mystery. For centuries people have been trying to explain this mystery in various ways.

In the Roman Catholic Church people believe that the bread becomes transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The fancy word for this transformation is transubstantiation. Somehow the bread becomes Jesus' body through the miracle of the liturgy and the strength of our faith. There is a place in the service when the altar server will ring a little bell to remind alert the congregation to the fact that this miracle is about to take place. The ringing reminds the church to people to pay attention to this imminent transformation.

But we don't explain the power of communion in the same way. We don't believe that communion is best explained as a miracle where Jesus' body is literally present in the bread which has been broken. We don't think communion is less powerful because his flesh and blood is not authentically recovered in the bread and wine. When we come to this table we believe that Jesus is our host. We believe that Jesus' presence is made real and we recognize that we are in God's presence. How that happens is a mystery.

Today's scripture reading comes from the gospel of Luke. It is a famous story about two disciples who were going down the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were discussing what they had seen or heard of the end of Jesus' life- his arrest, his trial, and his crucifixion. Intent on their conversation, after a while they were aware of a stranger who was eaves dropping. He seemed curious and so they included him and told him everything they knew about Jesus. Finally after hours of talk and miles of walking they turned in at to a wayside inn for dinner. They invited their new friend to join them, which he did. As the bread arrived at the table, this man took it up and broke it. Something about his gesture reminded them of Jesus –their rabbi who had been lost to them, but was alive at this meal.

This man did not look like Jesus. But when they broke bread together those disciples knew that they were in God's presence. I know I mentioned in another sermon that I have a print of a famous painting in my office. It is entitled "Kitchen Maid at the Supper at Emmaus". In the foreground of the painting there is a maid with pots and bowls on a table. You see her head is tilted at an angle like she is listening to the men in the next room. Then, you follow her glance over her shoulder to see two men seated. These men are not clearly drawn or distinct, but as you study one of them, he bears a remarkable resemblance to Jesus

I have this painting in my office because it reminds me of the mystery of our encounters with God. Like that maid we sit in the foreground of life's canvas, and we are surrounded by our detritus- our

utensils, our appliances, and gadgets all askew. When we encounter God, it is so often for an instant, and we may not even know what has happened until we move into another room, and look back over our shoulder, and wonder - What just happened? As we ponder, God in Christ passed through.

Communion is one of those moments when we realize that Jesus has visited us. He has come to our table, and broken bread with us. Exactly how it happens is a mystery, but the fact that it happens is something people have been feeling for generations. Communion brings us closer to God.

In the second place communion brings us closer to each other. When we take communion in worship we change our focus. For much of the service we think about our own spiritual journey. We pray to God, or listen to God's Word or praise God with our songs. But when we take communion we all do it together. One of you told me that you like communion because as you watch people stream forward to get the bread and cup you see who is at worship. You like the feeling of being together.

There is a deeper connection in this sacrament than the opportunity to see each other and be seen. When we come forward we all acknowledge our hunger. As human beings we are born hungry. Babies cry that loud insistent wail when they want food. And the common drive to find food has shaped all of our lives and the history of life as we know it. Hunger and thirst are our most basic need.

At communion we see how much we all hunger for spiritual food. In her memoir Sara Miles tells about her life. A liberal activist born to hippy activists, Sara knew she was hungry but she did not know what she was looking for. She started as a foodie working for chefs in Manhattan, and loved the intensity for a while. She went to Mexico and worked as a correspondent and then as a radical supporter of the resistance movement in El Salvador. Among the poorest people she recognized the power of food. Finally she moved to San Francisco and settled down as a writer and mother. Happier than ever, she still felt vaguely hungry, and did not know what she was looking for, until she stumbled into a church one Sunday morning and took communion. It was a mystery she tried to explain in her book – [Take this](#)

Bread: The spiritual memoir of a twenty-first-century Christian. Without ever knowing it, one thing Sara had been missing and was seeking when she stumbled into that church, was a community of faith.

When I started to work on this topic I realized that we had named it wrong. It is really a month to think about Christian Community and how we find spiritual nurture through worship – specifically through the rites and sacraments of our common life of faith.

The old definition of a Christian was – a hungry pilgrim who shows you where they have found nourishment.” When we come to this table we remind one another that we are all hungry for a kind of spiritual nurture you cannot get at work. You can find endorphins at the gym but this is different. You can make friends in the neighborhood, but they only go so deep. You can find peace meditating but not the peace that passes understanding.

When we took our church trip to the Holy Land in 2010 I wanted to have communion one day, but I was not certain when it would fit in best. So, just to be sure, I carried a little jar of juice and some bread in my backpack every day. Finally on the fifth day we were headed onto the Mount of olives and we entered the walled garden in Gethsemane, and I knew this was the spot. We sat in a circle for devotions, and then I gave everyone a plastic cup of juice and some bread I had saved from lunch. One voice in my head full of doubt, wondered if people would think it was too cheesy, but no one did. You see it did not matter that we used plastic, or that the bread was familiar. What mattered was that we remembered the story of Jesus at supper with his disciples and knew that ordinary elements can take on a sacred power when people come together in Christ’s name.