

The Lord's Supper

Psalm 104:13-15 NRS ¹³ From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. ¹⁴ You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth, ¹⁵ and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine, and bread to strengthen the human heart.

John 6:33-35 NRS ³³ For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." ³⁴ They said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." ³⁵ Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34 NRS ²⁰ 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. ²² 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! ²³ 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 loaf of bread, ²⁴ and when he had 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." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. ²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper, Communion, Holy Communion, the Eucharist – what are we talking about? What is it? Why is it important? Over the centuries this sacrament has had various forms and various understandings. There was a time when people were so scared of taking communion that they avoided it. In 1215, the church finally declared that you were required to take communion at least once a year. In some Christian traditions, the bread and wine become the flesh and blood of Jesus. In other traditions, bread and grape juice serve as symbols, as reminders. Some churches serve the Lord's Supper every week or even more often; some serve it very rarely. Some use yeast bread, some unleavened bread. Some use special wafers that can bring Styrofoam to mind. Over two millennia, many forms and practices of the Lord's Supper have evolved.

For many of us, it has become ritual. We're suspicious of ritual. We often use the expression "empty ritual" or "just ritual." After all, we're rational, enlightened people who tend to expect anything that is important, to be expressed in words. **Except!** Except when a neighbor's son is missing in action and everybody ties a yellow ribbon around a tree in their front yard. Except when someone graduates from college and puts on a long gown and wears a funny flat-topped hat with a tassel on it. Except Thanksgiving Day when most of us expect turkey whether we eat it the rest of the year or not. Except when a high school girl is killed in a car accident and people leave flowers and candles and teddy bears at the site of the accident. Except when we sing *Silent Night* by candlelight on Christmas Eve.

Today, if someone isn't familiar with worship that includes communion, they might find the whole process a bit puzzling and strange. While they hear the words "supper" or "feast" they see only a nibble of bread and a thimble of juice. They might hear the word "celebrate" -- but people would be silently and solemnly nibbling and sipping.

The earliest documents in the New Testament are the letters written by the apostle Paul. First Corinthians was probably written close to twenty-five years after Jesus' death and it contains the earliest information that we have about the Lord's Supper. And Paul might not have mentioned it - if there hadn't been a problem involved that he needed to correct. More about that in a moment.

Bread and wine were the staple food and drink of the Mediterranean diet. They were so basic and essential that they also symbolized the material necessities for existence. We say meat and potatoes in

much the same way. It's important to note that this sacrament is based on food, that which nourishes us and sustains life. The Lord's Supper provides the staff of life, the stuff of living.

We often treat the Lord's Supper as if it were a replay of the Last Supper. And since we know what happened later that night and the next day, the arrest and execution of Jesus, it tends to be a sober and mournful ritual. But, for Christians, there is no such thing as Christ crucified - and not risen. The early Christians met on the day of Christ's resurrection. They gathered at the table to have a joyful feast, a celebration. They sensed that in some wonderful way they were eating and drinking with their risen Lord. In the Lord's Supper, Jesus was especially alive and present with them. This supper was the continuation of the meal practice of Jesus. Jesus ate with outcasts, the impure, folks on the margin of society. The world then had distinct boundaries between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, clean and unclean. But the meal practice of Jesus crossed those boundaries – it was about openness and inclusivity.

We say that The Lord's Supper is a sacrament. A sacrament is a sacred moment, a sacred action, sacred not because the action is holy in itself, but because it expresses something sacred that can't be completely expressed and felt through words alone. Saying, "I like you" doesn't convey as much as a hug does. Some messages are too big and too important for words. Some feelings have to be done, not spoken. And a sacrament is exactly that, something about the sacred relationship between God and us that is too deep, too big, too important for words alone – and so we act it out.

In the Lord's Supper, we act out our relationship with Jesus. In a world with strict social and religious boundaries, he ate and drank with the righteous and the sinners, the rich and poor, the clean and unclean, folks just as varied as us, just as worthy and unworthy as us. And so we act out that truth.

In John's gospel, chapter six, Jesus said, "the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. . . . I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6:33-35 NRS) Jesus is food for the journey of faith. He quenches our thirst and satisfies our hunger. Just as the Passover lamb was food for the journey out of Egypt, Jesus, the Lamb of God, is food for our journey of faith. The Psalmist said that God gave us "wine to gladden the human heart . . . and bread to strengthen the human heart. Jesus is the bread of life. He is bread to strengthen our heart and wine to make it glad. We are what we eat – and Jesus is bread and wine – food for the soul.

As we act out our relationship with Christ in the Lord's Supper, the line between past and present becomes fuzzy. In Deuteronomy we see how an old story can become the story of the one telling it. For many generations after the Hebrews settled in Canaan, they would recite their history as they offered the first fruits of the fields each year. "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶ When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, ⁷ we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; ⁸ The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders;" (Deut 26:5-8 NRS) Did you hear the shift from speaking about "our ancestors" to saying that the history happened to "us?" We do the same thing. We talk about the pilgrims coming to the New World and somewhere in the telling we begin to say "we left England to come worship the way we thought best." It doesn't matter that our individual ancestors arrived in 1850 or 1920, the story becomes our story. In the same way, we gather at the table with saints all through the ages and we all dine with Christ.

In today's passage from First Corinthians, Paul was upset with the church in Corinth over the way they ate the Lord's Supper. He said, "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper." (1Cor 11:20 NRS) Paul said if you eat the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, you are answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves because if you eat and drink without discerning the body, you bring judgment on yourself. That's pretty scary! That's often been understood to mean that if your slate isn't clean, if all your sins haven't been forgiven, then if you take communion, you are damned. No wonder some people are reluctant to take communion!

But let's read this in context. What has Paul so upset? What have these folks in Corinth done? The text is clear. There were no church buildings for the first three centuries and so this was part of a meal in a private home. That's what Jesus did in an upper room. That's what we do in fellowship hall on rally day. But in Corinth, some came early and ate sumptuously, leaving little for others. Some overindulged in the wine, more focused on getting drunk than on remembering Christ. They treated the church with contempt. They put the poor to shame. They called it the Lord's Supper, but ate in a way that was totally foreign to the meal practice of Jesus. They lost sight of community and privatized their faith. They brought judgment on themselves for their disunity, for their disregard for their neighbor, for their lack of community, for their social stratification. Before we start feeling too righteous, we too, should discern. One clear example from our own past are all of the houses of worship that were built in this country, north and south, that had a balcony where African-Americans, slave or free, were expected to sit during worship. That bears a terrible resemblance to the attitude of the church in Corinth.

As the church, we are the body of Christ. In a very real way, we are the hands and feet of our Lord. One of the major purposes of the church is to exhibit the Kingdom of Heaven to the world. One of the banners hanging on the wall of this sanctuary proclaims that very purpose. We are to show others a glimpse of how life is lived in God's realm. Jesus said, ^{NRS} **Luke 13:29** "People will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God." And that is exactly why Paul is upset with the Christians in Corinth. The Lord's Supper is supposed to be a manifestation of what the kingdom of God is like.

That night in an upper room, as Jesus ate with his disciples, he founded this meal. Can you hear him saying, "This is my body – myself, my teaching, my life's work, my example. I have devoted my life to you. I have given my life to you. This is my blood. My life blood. My life has been poured out for your sake. Tonight, when I could be running, I'm eating with you." I'm showing you yet again that living in the kingdom where God reigns is all about sharing, being nourished and fed, being supported and strengthened – just like we do in this common meal.

The bread on the table reminds us of Christ's physical body, of his life, of his teaching, of his death, yes, but also of his resurrection. Paul talks a lot about the body of Christ. He said that now, the church is the body of Christ. Discerning the body involves an evaluation of how well we relate to Christ and how well we relate to others in the church.

Sometimes we call the Lord's Supper by other names. We call it Communion. That's a translation of the Greek word *koinonia*, which means fellowship, sharing, and unity. Lack of *koinonia*, lack of communion, lack of fellowship and sharing is what had Paul so upset with the church in Corinth.

We call it the Eucharist, the Thanksgiving. In every account of the founding of this meal, we are told that Jesus took the bread, gave thanks (or blessed it), broke it, and gave it. Giving thanks became central to the lives of the early church, being grateful for all of the blessings of life, large and small. Jesus taught them to be thankful for their daily bread and to be thankful that God sent rain on the just and the unjust alike. They had been blessed by knowing Jesus. They learned that their relationship with God was as a child of God, receiving the love and blessings of God. That stood in stark contrast to how the Greeks and Romans tried to buy the favor of their gods - or quench the wrath of their gods.

So, let us now, with gratitude, in fellowship and unity, discerning the body of Christ past and present, come and celebrate the feast that our Lord has given us! Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,
Remember that Jesus is the bread of life.
Eat that bread. Take in all that Jesus offers.
Do so in communion, in fellowship.
Do so with Eucharist, with thanksgiving
For Christ's life and his body, the church.