

"Who do we think we are, anyway? – Table"

Rev. Melanie Harrell Delaney
November 24th, 2013

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

The Institution of the Lord's Supper

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, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that 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.

I watched the bread and cup pass from hands to hands. Some of the hands were wrinkly with sun spots. Some of the hands had skin the color of dark chocolate. Some of the hands shook and nearly dropped the plate of bread, and some gripped so firmly I could see white knuckles. Youthful hands held the bread while unsure hands broke off a piece and dipped the delicious chunk into the red grape juice. A pair of bright eyes sparkled as the little girl spoke the words, “this is Christ’s body, broken for you.” Then, a pair of dry lips opened to whisper back the words, “Amen,” before receiving a mouthful of moist bread. A sigh of relief and then a smile exchanged showed the understanding now connecting the young and the old. Then, the wrinkly hands turned to hold the bread for yet another one of God’s beloved: “This is Christ’s body, broken for you...”

I have seen the Lord’s supper shared hundreds of times, in so many different ways. Passed through pews in golden trays; in a woven basket and plastic cup on a mission trip; handed pre-packaged from an Elder to the homebound; touched to the lips of a dying man; offered to an eager child for the first time or an elderly woman for the gazillionth time. The type of bread or the age of the juice may differ, the means of serving may be familiar or not, but the power of the words, “this is Christ’s body, broken for you...” the power in that memory and declaration is never diminished.

The Lord’s supper, our weekly ritual of coming the table for communion, is one of the oldest traditions among Christians. As Disciples of Christ, we trace our weekly

ritual all the way to Christ himself, when he gathered one last time with his disciples to share the Jewish tradition of a Passover meal with them.

The Gospel of Luke describes in chapter 22 how Jesus took his place at the table for the Passover meal and the apostles joined him. As they settled in for the ritual that they would have known so very well, Jesus broke from tradition to say words that would have caught them all off guard. ‘I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer,’ he said, ‘I tell you, I won’t eat it until it is fulfilled in God’s kingdom.’ Then Jesus raised the cup and gave thanks, passing it around for everyone to share. Then he took a loaf of bread and gave thanks again, breaking it in two and passing it around, saying that this was his body; and he took the cup and passed it around again, calling it the new covenant in his blood poured out for them.

These words, so familiar to us, would have seemed upsetting (if not crazy) to the first disciples. These words weren’t part of the expected tradition, the regular liturgy remembering the liberation and exodus of the Israelites. Instead, these words pointed to suffering, broken bodies and blood spilled. What was Jesus talking about, they must have wondered?

Today, with the blessing of our holy scriptures and hindsight, we know precisely what Jesus was referring to – his forthcoming unjust arrest, death on the cross, the pain of cruelty at the hands of people who didn’t understand his mission, but then, ultimately, the joy and freedom proclaimed in his resurrection. Jesus life, death and resurrection became a witness to God’s power of love triumphant over the forces of death!

And so, the memory of that quiet night in the upper room, when Jesus shared the broken bread and cup of salvation with his disciples became symbolic of the power of Jesus’ entire life poured out for all of creation. “Do this in remembrance of me,” Jesus said. So they did.

Early Christian communities of all shapes and sizes began to form after Jesus’ death and resurrection, many under the leadership of Paul. The church in Corinth, the recipients of the letter to the Corinthians included in scripture, was one of these early Christian communities. They had been worshipping together and trying to follow Jesus’ way for some time, but as of late they had been slipping.

They had been partaking in the Lord's Supper regularly, as Paul taught them, but the way they were doing so was becoming a bit problematic. Some were coming first and eating the bread and drinking the wine (some were drinking a bit more than their share it would seem, for Paul points out that they are drunk before the others even arrive), while others were coming in later and having communion on their own. The meal was not being shared as one unified community, but as individuals. Paul is concerned that they have lost the meaning behind what they are doing and so he writes this part of the letter to remind them.

"For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you," Paul says. The ritual and meaning in the Lord's Supper comes from Christ himself, not Paul. Paul then goes on to relay the story of Jesus' last meal with his disciples – how he took one loaf of bread and shared it with everyone at the table and the cup in the same way, all at once. Paul tells the story again for the Corinthians and us to hear once more – in order to remember, as Jesus requested, and to tell it again and again.

Again and again we pass one loaf of broken bread and one cup poured out in order to remember and to "proclaim" Christ's death and resurrection. The word "proclaim" here can mean "preach," to tell and declare, Paul means it in a much wider sense. Paul considers the act of sharing bread and cup at the Lord's table to be an action that through our very practice of it "proclaims." Paul is saying that when people live fully in the new life of Christ, when we live and act in the way that Christ teaches us, we live our faith in a way that is visible and real to other people. When we come to the table all together, we remember Christ through our actions – by making his love real in the world.

Just like the Corinthians needed to remember, so we "remember" every week, the whole story of redemption in Christ and the life we are called to live together. We come to remember and proclaim the unity of Christ's church. Here at Good Shepherd, we come to the Lord's Table every week, to remember who we are and whose we are, to rehearse God's story and our part in it.

"We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us." This is the identity statement of our denomination, a glimpse of who we are as part of the movement for unity among God's people. Over the past four weeks, we have been looking deeply at this identity so that we can

remember and understand who we are and how we have come to this point in our wider faith journey. A few weeks ago we talked about what it means to be a “movement,” to be moving forward in our faith and toward a goal: God’s Kingdom and peace on Earth. We have remembered our commitment and passion for unity (not conformity) among God’s people, and our efforts to bring wholeness and healing to broken places in our world. Last week we considered what it means to be a people of welcome – that we welcome all people to God’s table because it is God who first welcomes us. Today, all of these pieces of our identity meet us at the Table. We are a people moving toward unity, welcoming others to join us as we meet to live out Christ’s vision and promise at the Lord’s Table.

Sharing communion as often as we gather is a practice passed down to us from the founders of our denomination. Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, among others, were united in their passion for Christian unity and their commitment to the Lord’s Table as a place where this unity and God’s grace is poured out. For them, the Lord’s Supper was the glue that held God’s people together despite our tendencies to divide and separate ourselves from one another. Campbell, in particular, felt passionately that we should break one whole loaf every time we have communion, for in the breaking and sharing of one loaf we are saying to each other, “You my brother [or sister], once an alien, are now a citizen of heaven; once a strange are now brought home to the family of God.” Campbell affirmed what Paul claimed to be true: that the one table and one loaf symbolize the oneness of the church and God’s people as the community of Christ.

Each time we gather at the communion table, something incredibly holy happens. As the trays pass from wrinkled hands to youthful ones, between various shades of skin or unique personalities and passions, or as we come out of our seats to stand with one another in line to share in our piece of the broken bread and our taste of the cup poured out, we are remembering something important. Each time we do this, we are living something crucial. We are being God’s people and proclaiming good news.

At the Lord’s Table, we are proclaiming that the story of Christ’s life, death and resurrection still has power in our lives today; that Christ’s sacrifice and promise made so long ago continues to be real and true for all and forever.

We are proclaiming that through the one body broken and one cup shared, God pours out an abundance of sustenance and grace for every single person who might show up to share communion with us. We remember the story of the loaves and fishes, how when Christ is present, there is *always* enough.

We are proclaiming that no human-made barrier can keep us from God's presence and Table. We remember that at God's Table, the barriers that we build around ourselves and between ourselves come tumbling down. Here, there is no Hebrew or Greek, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, gay or straight, faithful or sinner or doubtful. Here, we are simply human; each and every one a beloved child of God covered in abundant grace.

Here, at God's Table, we remember.

We remember the story and our part in it.

We remember the grace and the love that God offers us despite ourselves.

We remember God's joy in welcoming the least and the lost – God's persistent love for us.

And here, we commit ourselves to living the way Jesus lived, loving the way he loved serving the way he served.

"We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord's Table as God has welcomed us."

When we do this, we have truly remembered.