

THE MEANING OF COMMUNION

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
September 14, 2003**

"He took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."ⁱ So reports the Apostle Luke on Jesus' words at his last Passover Seder with his disciples before he was executed by the Romans. The biblical passage commonly used, though, in the words of institution for communion, as here at Stanford Memorial Church, comes from the Apostle Paul, writing about 55 A.D.,ⁱⁱ twenty-some years after Jesus's death: "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 is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"ⁱⁱⁱ

What exactly is the meaning of communion? It's been central to the worshipping life of Christians back to the very beginning. We do it twice a month here in Memorial Church. Yet, what are we really doing? Communion literally means "sharing." It's breaking bread together. The word "communion" comes from King James Bible translation of the Greek word for "sharing" which Paul used in describing the taking of bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ.^{iv} The Latin root is com-mun'-is, meaning participation by all. The same root is used for the words common, community, and communicate.^v It's supposed to bring everyone together as one body. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, when speaking of sharing bread as the body of Christ, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."^{vi}

"One bread, one body," and yet an argument over whether to use leavened or unleavened bread in communion was a principal basis for the split between the Church of Rome and the Eastern Orthodox Church in the eleventh century.^{vii} "One bread, one body," and yet my Protestant father, who lovingly went to mass with my Catholic mother every Sunday, was never allowed to take communion together with her. "One bread, one body," and yet Protestant reformers Luther and Zwingli argued bitterly and split over whether the bread and wine were the actual flesh and blood of Christ or merely symbolized his body and blood, an argument that persists today.^{viii}

Of course "communion" is not the only word used to describe this Christian ritual. At another point, as you heard in today's gospel reading, Paul calls it "the Lord's Supper."^{ix} One

more common term, as we use in the Memorial Church order of service, is "Eucharist." That means "thanksgiving," and while there's no indisputable Biblical use of this term to describe the bread and wine ritual, "Eucharist" was in common use by Christian writers from the second century on.^x It was the Greek word used for giving thanks or blessings over food,^{xi} as: "Jesus took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it."^{xii}

The fullest Biblical account that we have of communion as it was practiced in the early Christian Church comes from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. At that time it was part of a full-scale meal, apparently in the home of a member of the Christian community in Corinth.^{xiii} Paul criticizes the Corinthian Christians, however, because they have come to observe communion as a highly individualized, privatized matter: "For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk."^{xiv}

Paul also seems to be concerned that there were significant distinctions being made between rich and poor: "You show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing." As one biblical commentary I use puts it, wealthy people were apparently invited earlier for the choice food and drink. Then poorer Christians came later to "find, along with tipsy co-worshipers, leftover food at best."^{xv} Obviously this violated the radical social vision of equality that Jesus continually promoted.

So Paul calls each member of the Christian community at Corinth to self-examination before partaking of the Lord's Supper.^{xvi} Then when they come together to eat as a church, he asks them to wait for one another^{xvii} and then to break bread together in explicit remembrance of Jesus, as he instructed at his own Last Supper.^{xviii}

The larger Christian church subsequently formalized communion -- or the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist -- and made a small ritual meal part of worship services. What remains absolutely central to the ritual, however, is the concept of community, the idea of overcoming distinctions and barriers, the coming together as one body to share in the one bread. Jesus came with a clear understanding of human solidarity, which he symbolized again and again in the face of fierce criticism, by breaking bread with tax collectors and sinners and outcasts^{xix}, by breaking bread with the multitudes.^{xx} This language from the Gospel of John sounds familiar, doesn't it, describing how he fed 5,000 people by the Sea of Galilee: "Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated."^{xxi} He didn't ask if all those people were his followers, or were merely curious about him, or in fact were doubtful. He didn't distinguish between rich and poor, male and female, Jew and Gentile.

Communion is not just a matter of ingathering in unity. It should also nourish us for an outpouring of love in the world. Jesus always did both. He gathered people to break bread together, and then he sent them out to feed and clothe and comfort others: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you

welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me... Just as you did it to the least of these [my brothers and sisters]...you did it to me."

Catholic priest Henri Nouwen once wrote in a eucharistic prayer: "Dear Lord... Isn't my faith in your presence in the breaking of the bread meant to reach out beyond the small circle of my brothers to the larger circle of humanity and to alleviate suffering as much as possible? If I can recognize you in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, I must also be able to recognize you in the many hungry men, women and children [in the world]. If I cannot translate my faith in your presence, under the appearance of bread and wine, into action for the world, I am still an unbeliever. I pray, therefore, Lord, deepen my faith in your Eucharistic presence and help me find ways to let this faith bear fruit in the lives of many. Amen."^{xxii}

A church I used to belong to in inner-city Boston was located on what was called Meetinghouse Hill. People who knew what went on in the church, though, called it "Eating House Hill." The minister, Rev. Allen, always had a huge pot of stew or chili or soup cooking on the stove in the kitchen and lots of fresh bread. Many people came by that church during the week asking for help paying their rent or utilities. They came to discuss problems with the welfare office or the Social Security Administration or local merchants. They came because their children had just been taken away for alleged neglect, or because they couldn't get health care, or because they were about to be deported as "illegal aliens."

This minister never passed the buck. He always seemed to provide cash when needed, and he got on the phone and called people he knew in the agencies and businesses with which people were having trouble. All the time he was ladling out stew and bread. Most of these people in need didn't come to church on Sunday and therefore didn't formally take communion, although some of them sent their children to Sunday School. No matter, though. They experienced communion. For half an hour or more they were able to come in out of the cold and find a warm and welcoming human face who asked them to break bread with him and the others who happened to be around that kitchen table each day. Not only did they fill their stomachs, and get concrete assistance with their problem, they filled their souls. And privileged people like me did too, simply by being at that table.

Another minister I knew in Boston once preached about soul food, starting with the African American tradition developed during slavery -- with turnip and collard greens and chitlins and hog's knuckles -- and ending with the soup and bread that this minister's own father was able to get him when they were in a concentration camp together.^{xxiii} He talked about soul food coming from a time of trial, but also being a sign of affection on the part of those who actually prepare it and serve it. To refuse such food is to refuse love. He gave J.D. Salinger's Franny and Zooey as an example, when Franny is obsessed looking for God, trying to repeat the Jesus prayer properly, over and over again: "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." Increasingly she

withdraws from her family and friends, her work and her everyday life until her brother Zooey gets through to her:

I'll tell you one thing, Franny. One thing I know. And don't get upset. But if it's the religious life you want, you ought to know that you're missing out on every single religious action that's going on around this house. You don't even have sense enough to drink when somebody brings you a cup of consecrated chicken soup, which is the only kind of chicken soup Bessie ever brings anybody around this madhouse. So just tell me, buddy. Even if you went out and searched the whole world for a master, some guru, some holy man, to tell you how to say your Jesus prayer properly, what good would it do you? How [the heck]... are you going to recognize a legitimate holy man when you see one if you don't even know a cup of consecrated chicken soup when it's right in front of your nose?"^{xxiv}

"Soul food is an act of love... Bread and wine are the soul food of the Christian. They come from a time of trial, [and] they are invested with love."^{xxv}

May the time come when Christian communion is a true sharing, when Christians are united by this ancient ritual in remembrance of Jesus, rather than divided by it, when Christians reach out beyond their own community to break bread with tax collectors and sinners and outcasts -- indeed, with the multitudes. May Christian communion stimulate an outpouring of love for others, especially those who suffer, and just as importantly an acceptance of love for oneself. Through communion, may we commemorate the life and death of Jesus the Christ and then celebrate his true spiritual presence with us now, and every day. AMEN.

NOTES

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- i. Luke 22:19.
 - ii. The Jerome Biblical Commentary (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), p. 255.
 - iii. I Corinthians 11: 23-25.
 - iv. Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago, 1978), Vol. III, p. 46.
 - v. See William Morris, Ed., The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1973), pp. 268-270.
 - vi. I Corinthians 10:17.
 - vii. Jonathan Z. Smith, The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 820.
 - viii. Jim Burko, Open Christianity (Los Altos, California: Rising Star Press, 2000), pp. 163-164.
 - ix. I Corinthians 11:20; See the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), Vol. 3, p. 158.
 - x. Interpreter's Dictionary, Vol. 2, p. 179; Vol. 3, p. 158.
 - xi. Ibid., Volume 2, p. 179.
 - xii. Luke 22:19; I Corinthians 11: 23-24; See also the accounts of Jesus feeding the multitudes in Matthew 15:36, Mark 14:23 and Luke 22: 17,19, as cited in the Interpreter's Dictionary, p. 179.
 - xiii. New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), Vol. X, p. 934.
 - xiv. I Corinthians 11:21.
 - xv. New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. X, p. 934.
 - xvi. I Corinthians 11:28.
 - xvii. I Corinthians 11:33.
 - xviii. I Corinthians 11: 23-26.
 - xix. See, for example, Matthew 9: 10-13.

xx. See Matthew 15: 32-38; Mark 8: 1-9; John 6:1-14.

xxi. John 6:11.

xxii. Henri Nouwen, Writings Selected with an Introduction by Robert A. Jonas (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 95.

xxiii. See Carl Scovel, "Soul Food," The Unitarian Universalist Christian, Vol. 57 (2002), pp. 90-92.

xxiv. As quoted in Ibid., p. 91.

xxv. Ibid., p. 92.