



race Church

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Instructed Eucharist part 2: The Service of the Table

Sermon for Epiphany 1, January 10, 2016

In the first part of this Instructed Eucharist, I reviewed the parts of the service that come under the heading Service of the Word. Now I would like to turn to the second part, the Service of the Table, or Holy Communion.

First of all, let's remember that Holy Communion *is* a meal—heavily ritualized but a true meal nonetheless. Jesus was all about eating with people, sharing “table fellowship.” All kinds of people: sinners and tax collectors as well as religious authorities and teachers. Sometimes the religious authorities would question his practice of eating with sinners, and some of the most memorable parts of the gospels are Jesus’ responses.

For instance, in one story a woman known to have been a prostitute and adulterer came in and bathed Jesus’ feet with ointment and her own tears (Luke 7:36-50). The others at the table commented that Jesus should know better than to let such a woman do such a thing. On the contrary, he replied, she has bathed my feet with tears out of love. But the Pharisees in whose home Jesus was invited did not offer the hospitality of foot washing often given to guests in that culture, they did not offer Jesus other gestures of kindness and love. Perhaps they felt a sense of superiority and the pride of righteousness. Jesus told them a parable of a debtor who is forgiven much and loves much in return, but “the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.”

Jesus ate with high and low, sinner and saint—and so should we, for we are all both sinner and saint, equal in the eyes of God but in need of forgiveness as any. But Jesus’ most memorable meal was the one he shared with his closest disciples on the night before his arrest and crucifixion. The Last Supper was a Passover seder, the traditional Jewish meal of remembrance during which the story of the Exodus is retold. It begins with a prayer over the breaking of the bread—and when this happened, Jesus told the disciples that the bread he breaks is his body, given for the world. At the end of the meal, the last of the cups of wine is drunk—the cup of Elijah, the cup of longing for the coming of the anointed one, the Messiah, and for the coming of the Lord’s Day, the restoration of the kingdom of God. This cup of wine, Jesus said, is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin, for the restoration and reconciliation of God and humanity. It is the sign of a new covenant.

One of the great signs of the coming kingdom is the miracle of loaves and fishes, in which Jesus and his disciples miraculously find enough to feed thousands of people from the meager resources of five loaves of bread and two fish (as told in Matthew 14:13-21). In the second chapter of the gospel according to John, Jesus saves a wedding party by changing many gallons of water into good wine—a story we Episcopalians love. There are other stories—and they are always about trusting in God and sharing what we have—a teaching that shows us that individually we are always afraid of not having enough, and so hoard and fall prey to completion and scarcity, but together we do have plenty, and if we cooperate there is abundance (as every potluck supper, beloved of churches, demonstrates).

Also in the gospel according to John, chapter 6, Jesus speaks of being the bread of heaven, as well as the water of life: those who eat and drink of him will never hunger and thirst. But it is not a matter of getting one's "daily bread" met by a miraculous new kind of manna from heaven. It is a matter of following Jesus and trusting in him as the word of God—for humanity does not live by bread alone but by the word of God. And Jesus is the word made flesh.

Another connection of bread and the word of God is disclosed in the story of the disciples encountering Jesus on the road to Emmaus after the crucifixion of their leader (Luke 24:13-35). Not recognizing Jesus as the stranger who fall in with them, they listen to him explain how the scriptures show that the Messiah needed to be killed, and then raised on the third day. when they get to their destination, he joins them for a meal. when he breaks and blesses the bread, they recognize him—and so learn the lesson of his presence in the holy scriptures, the prayers and the breaking of the bread.

In other resurrection appearances, Jesus proves his bodily resurrection by eating fish together with others (John 21). He is not a ghost or a pure spirit, but a new kind of body, a spiritual body, as Paul puts it later. Writing some twenty or thirty years after the death and resurrection, Paul relates how he is handing on what has been handed to him, how Jesus broke the bread and shared the wine as his body and blood and commanded the church to remember him when they do this. And so the young church did, sharing communal meals and sensing Christ's presence.

But as the church spread, and the meals were held in homes of people in Greece and Turkey—cities such as Corinth and Ephesus—distinctions of class and tribe crept in. Sometimes rich people would get the larger portions and eat before the rest. Paul condemns this practice in his first letter to the Corinthians. Sometimes there were disputes over what kinds of food were permitted, whether diet should be kosher, or whether it was permissible to eat meat that been sacrificed at temples of the various gods (portions of these sacrifices were then sold at market to support the temple). There have always been food fights. Different notions of what are acceptable manners and customs.

And as the church matured, there were also many different theories about what was happening in the Eucharistic meal. A lot of ink—and blood—has been spent on the sacred physics and theological meaning of holy communion. During the middle ages, Thomas Aquinas used Aristotelian physics to explain how the bread and wine remained the same in form (appearance) but were in reality transformed into a different substance or essence—the true body and blood of Jesus—through *transubstantiation*. With the dawning of a new science, the old Aristotelian categories lost plausibility—and so Luther prosed a theory of *consubstantiation*—the real presence of Christ in, with and under the elements of bread and wine. John Calvin, writing shortly after, considered holy communion more of a memorial meal than real presence. He wrote that it is the Holy Spirit within the believer that makes the communion real, not the actions of the priest. And so the Reformed tradition—such as the Dutch Reformed or Scottish Presbyterian churches—offer a more symbolic and memorial understanding—and worry less about carefully handling and consuming the elements than do the Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican traditions. Indeed the care and

reverence in the Catholic tradition grew so intense during the middle ages and counter-Reformation that many people were afraid of taking Communion—they did not understand the language of the rite and simply prayed individually while the priest did the liturgical work. The moment of communal participation came when the priest held up the Host (this continues through a service called the “adoration of the host” in which the holy bread is displayed in a special vessel and the people offer prayers in the presence of Christ). Even today, most Catholics will consume only the bread while the priest and a few others consume the wine.

Anglicans generally take communion in “both kinds”—though usually in a wafer form that hardly resembles bread, and a port wine that is heavier than our usual dinner wine. But today I have brought in for this service real elements of a meal: locally baked bread from Bread Alone (a healthy whole grain peasant’s bread, seems appropriate for Jesus), and for the children, cookies from RoseRandolph Cookies down the street. For wine I have a bottle of Hunt Country Red from Millbrook Winery. And I brought a bottle of Welch’s Grape Juice.

There is a great story behind Welch’s grape juice. In the 1870’s, Dr Thomas Welch, a dentist, figured out that the new method of pasteurization could work for grape juice as well as milk and prevent rapid fermentation. He was motivated to develop it because he was a Methodist and part of a growing abstinence movement. His son started the company to distribute the “pure juice of the vine” and in 1880 the Methodist church passed the rule: “let none but the pure juice of the grape be used in administering the Lord’s Supper.” And so began the practice of using grape juice in those traditions.

This morning we will use both—to remind ourselves that this a real meal. and during the Great Thanksgiving Eucharistic Prayer I will add some additional commentary on what we are doing in the particular sections.

Commentary on the Great Thanksgiving Eucharistic Prayer A

After the offertory is brought forward—and the offering of the people includes the bread and wine—and the table is set, the Great Thanksgiving Prayer begins. Lift up your hearts (*sursum corda*) is the first note: and we are reminded that the whole service began with a prayer for the cleansing and preparation of our hearts—our selves, our souls and bodies. We lift them, us, to the Lord, as it is right to do—and a good and joyful thing.

Then the celebrant inserts a particular prayer for the season, called a preface, which is found in a different part of the Prayer Book—so in Epiphany, the season of the manifestation of Christ, we speak of the light of God shining in our hearts in the face of Jesus Christ.

In lifting our hearts and praising God we are also transported out of the narrow room of our selves and even our time and place into the company of angels and archangels and all the company of heaven. We are far from alone here; we are joined with other Christians around the world, before and to come. We are joined with the prophets who spoke of a vision of the heavenly court and all the host of heaven singing “Holy, holy, holy Lord.” We then join the rejoicing crowd that hailed the messiah as he rode into Jerusalem, saying “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.” (Recognizing that this one is none other than Jesus the Christ, the celebrant often makes a sign of the cross.)

Following this “sanctus” (holy), the celebrant offers a version of the sacred story of God’s creating and redeeming earth and humanity. How we were made good, but wandered and weakened, how God sought us and called us “through prophets, sages and the law” and finally, in the word made flesh, Jesus the Son. How he lived among us, sharing our lives and joys and sorrows, and offered himself, “a perfect sacrifice for

the sins of the world.” We recall how he gathered the disciples for a last meal, and told them to remember him whenever they broke this bread and drank this wine, until he comes again.

The priest repeats the very words Jesus spoke—the “words of institution”—and then the people join in in proclaiming the “mystery of faith” (a summation of our belief): Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again”: past, present and future.

Then the celebrant prays for the Holy Spirit to come down and sanctify the bread and wine so that it may truly be the body and blood of Christ. This calling down (“epiklesis”) of the Spirit continues with a prayer that we the people may also be sanctified—and here again the celebrant often crosses his heart, signifying this action of sanctification, or continuing growth in holiness and faithfulness, even to our final growth into a new and eternal life with God.

The great thanksgiving is addressed to our “holy and gracious Father” and all of the prayers within it are asked through the Son Jesus Christ: “By him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and for ever. *AMEN.*”

Concluding the prayer we then join with Christ and “are bold to say” “Our Father.”

We join with Jesus in this prayer that we taught the disciples to pray—and join with countless millions through the centuries and across the planet as well. And joined to the great communion, the celebrant breaks the local bread and says “Alleluia, Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.” And the people respond: Therefore let us keep the feast. alleluia.”

The celebrant may then hold the cup and plate (chalice and paten) out and offer “the gifts of God for the people of God,” and perhaps again ask us all to remember to take this gift in a spirit of faith and thanksgiving. Then the celebrant and the worship team share communion—sometimes an anthem such as “Lamb of God” (*agnus dei*) is sung while this happens. And finally the people come forward to receive “the body of Christ, the bread of heaven” and “the blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.” It is for many a moment when heaven and earth indeed draw near. For me it is a place where I feel closest both to each person who receives and to God who is palpably present in the exchange. What a heavenly banquet.

All are welcome. For it is the Table of the Lord—and he invites all people to come and share in the feast.

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

In Christ’s name, Amen.

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