

Sermon August 4, 2024
[John 6:24-35]

Holy Communion: A Place for You
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Grace to you, and peace this morning, from God, the Creator, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the Christ, Amen.

Last week, we heard about narratives, how we live our lives according to the stories we tell ourselves in the Gospel. Jesus, accordingly, invited us to rethink the narratives by which we live. Instead of presupposing the narrative of scarcity, as Philip did in last week's reading, we were invited, in our big decisions, whether individually or as congregation, to make decisions from a place of *abundance*, from the story of abundance, which is Jesus Christ.

This morning, we're going to move to something quite different. Yesterday was one of the most challenging moments of my call as your pastor. It wasn't the grief of someone with whom I was walking after sudden loss. It wasn't presiding at a funeral, which I'll be doing on Tuesday, and I know will be difficult for all of us, myself included. No, it was teaching first communion class to three middle schoolers.

Now the good news, the very good news, is that these three middle schoolers were sharp. They grasped the material quite easily. They understood the origin of Holy Communion and why we practice it, that it comes from Jesus, that according to the Gospels, as well as Paul, in his last supper with His followers before He was crucified, he promised that he would be present to them in the meal, in what we now call the sacrament of Holy Communion. We practice it, moreover, each week to re-embodiment, or remember, the very Jesus who was experienced by his earliest followers.

These middle schoolers also grasped how having a meal together during the time and culture in which Jesus lived was another way of saying, "I Love you, I welcome you. I accept you."

They understood, moreover, how revolutionary it was for Jesus to welcome all people to the table, to dine with sinners and tax collectors, with rich and with poor, with those at the bottom of the social ladder and those at the top. This was his way of showing those who followed him that God loves all people, irrespective of social standing.

It was clear to them, finally, why Jesus was killed. He was killed for disrupting the social order of the Roman world by eating with those who came from different strata of the society. Jesus was performing a revolutionary act, something we do in principle, whenever we receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Now, not only did they grasp the revolutionary implications of the meal Jesus instituted, how in the breaking of bread together, in Jesus's name, he turns that social world upside down, which, of course, as I said, caught the attention of the Roman authorities, who then squashed it as promptly as possible.

Not only did they grasp these things, I learned something too, and it's something I'd like to share with you this morning. Most of you know how I explain Holy

Communion every Sunday: that though God in Christ fills all things – which is language we take from our second reading of Ephesians – that though God in Christ fills all things – which again, reflects Martin Luther’s interpretation of what happens in the sacrament – that though God and Christ fills all things, God comes to us in a *special way* during Holy Communion.

This way is different than how we experience God, say, in the world of nature; looking at a horizon, for example, or perhaps a calm, placid lake at the top of a mountain or near it. These experiences of awe reflect the psalmist’s experience of nature, when he spoke of how “the heavens are the handiwork of God.” They parallel some of the greatest poetry in the world, and they affirm that God, indeed, through Christ, fills all things, charging God’s creation with God’s grandeur, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins says.

But in Holy Communion, instead of simply being filled with awe or wonder, we experience God in a much more personal, intimate way. This is God’s way of “becoming small for us,” you might say. And this is how people originally experienced God through Jesus, whether it was at the Last Supper, or throughout the various acts of His ministry: they experienced God through Jesus as loving, as forgiving, and as welcoming.

One of my favorite stories in this regard comes from the Gospel of Mark, where a young man approaches Jesus, asking him, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Instead of giving him an answer, “Well, you must follow all the commandments,” Jesus pauses, and the text says, “Jesus looked at him and he loved him.”

So in the sharing of this meal, we are reflecting that love that Jesus had for all people, rich or poor, slave or free, Jew or Greek. This is also how God, through Jesus, promises to meet us, not only each Sunday, but every Sunday throughout the course of our lives, God promises to come to us in this special way, such that we experience God in personal, intimate terms.

What we may not know, and what I certainly didn’t know, was how this promise was *already fulfilled* in the New Testament. I’ll give you a little background here. I’ve often had reservations about Martin Luther’s interpretation of communion, when he says that we must simply trust the words of Jesus, when Jesus says, “This is my body given for you, this is my blood shed for you.” I’ve often had trouble with that, and the reason is that it feels like an unfulfilled promise. Okay, I’m supposed to trust these things, but what I learned in yesterday’s class was how Jesus made good on this promise *already* in the New Testament, which gives it substance.

Now we know that the earliest followers of Jesus experienced the risen Christ in a variety of ways. Some, for example, like Paul, experienced him in visions. Others found an empty tomb. But the one way that really resonates with me occurs when two followers of Jesus – according to some scholars, possibly a husband and wife – were walking on the road to Emmaus after Jesus had been crucified. You know the story? It comes from Luke 24. These two disciples are walking along the road, and a stranger

joins them, and the stranger asks why they are so despondent. "What's the problem?" They ask him rhetorically. "Have you not heard of the crucifixion of Jesus in Jerusalem?" They continue walking, and as they near the end of the day, the stranger says that he will depart from them. The two disciples asked the stranger to stay, and in the process, they break bread with the stranger, and the text tells us that "their eyes were opened." The presence of Christ was among them when they broke bread together in His presence and in His name.

You see what happens. Jesus fulfills the promise he made to his disciples during the Lord's Supper, that he would indeed be present to them whenever they broke the bread together and shared it in his name! That already occurs in Scripture. So, it's not just that we're trusting an empty, unfulfilled promise. We're trusting in something that has already and continues to take place. And we have more evidence for it in one of the other writings of the New Testament. At the end of the gospel of Mark, we get a truncated version of the same story, of how two disciples were walking along the road and experienced him apart from the others, and then, as Luke tells us, in the breaking of the bread.

That's amazing to me. I don't know about your experience, but for me, it confirms not only that Jesus is trustworthy, that he fulfills his promises, it shows us how he defeats and overcomes death.

Following the earliest Christians, we evoke the living presence of Jesus whenever we break bread together in his name. As far as I'm concerned, the fundamental essence of Jesus's ministry was sharing, breaking bread together, making sure that those on the periphery had enough to eat.

And so you've now heard two ways in which Jesus is believed to be present in Holy Communion, first, in the elements themselves, when, according to the earliest strands of Lutheran tradition, Christ is present in, with, and under the bread. That's a Greek way of thinking. The Greeks identify the substance of something with its appearance as a thing. We see that in the Gospel of John.

There is, however, a second way of understanding how God is present, and that is from a Hebrew perspective. There, God is present, not simply in the things, but rather in *the act* of sharing, which is why I wish, instead of simply talking about the sacraments, we talked about Holy Communion, in particular, as *a sacramental action*. This is a verb: we invoke the presence of Christ whenever we break bread and share it in his name. That's a Hebrew way of thinking. I affirm both of these. But what I often hear when people talk about communion is only the first: that Jesus is in, with, and under the elements of themselves, rather than present, from a Hebraic perspective, in the very *act* of sharing, which, as I said, is the essence, I believe, of Jesus's ministry.

Now, there's a third way that Jesus, or Jesus's body, is present when we celebrate Holy Communion. Can you guess what it is? You've heard about the body of Christ on the table, but what about the body of Christ *at* the table? That's *you*. *We* become the presence of Jesus, when we gather in his name and break bread together.

There's one author who talks about this as "the transubstantiation of the congregation." I wouldn't explain that, but you get the idea; here we have a transformative act, the act of sharing in the name of Christ, that unites us, as Ephesians says, into one body and one Spirit.

Here, we often miss how counter-cultural Holy Communion is. Let's think about it for a moment. American culture emphasizes the differences that exist between us, doesn't it? These differences include political affiliation, whether you vote Democrat, Republican or Independent. These differences include income, whether you exist in a nice, comfortable home or on the street. They also include race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. Our culture has gotten really good at dividing us, and yet, without robbing of us of our unique identities, Holy Communion is the *one place in public life* where these differences dissolve, where it is no longer slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female, straight or gay, Republican or Democrat, but we're all one in the body of Christ.

In this act, in this revolutionary act, where the body of Christ receives the body of Christ, we glimpse the often otherwise elusive kingdom of God. In this moment of unity, it's not a hard proof for God's existence. It's a *heart* proof for God's existence. It's a way of saying, "Here in Christ, something new has broken into our reality, something that even death could not finish."

The name of Jesus Christ will be known, I believe, until the end of human civilization, but the names of all the Roman Empires will long be forgotten.

This morning, I invite you to receive Holy Communion with three things in mind, three things I discussed with my group of middle school students yesterday:

First, trust in the promise of Christ to be present whenever we break bread together in his name, knowing now how he already fulfilled his promise, and will do so again and again, as evident in the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. That's number one: trust in His presence.

Number two, as the body of Christ at the table when you receive Communion, look briefly to your left and to your right – not too long, that's probably a little awkward, but to your left and to your right – and notice how our differences dissolve when we break bread together in Jesus' name. Notice how these differences dissolve. That glimpse you have is a glimpse of the kingdom becoming manifest, not simply at the end of history, but at *this moment* in history. Instead of expecting the kingdom of God, here we *enact* the kingdom of God.

Third and finally, remember that there will always be a place for you at the Lord's table, that you belong here, and that God loves us all. This was my message to our three middle schoolers yesterday.

There will always be a place for you here. And that extends as well to each person here today.

In Jesus' name,
Amen.