

A Sermon for DaySpring  
By Eric Howell  
*Day by Day*  
Acts 2:46  
May 3, 2020

Six weeks ago, when in-person gatherings were suddenly shut down, we were about half way through a season of Lent in which we were celebrating communion each Sunday. Communion is a reminder of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and a sign of his broken body and shed blood and so Lent seemed like the right liturgical season to explore the spiritual significance of receiving communion more regularly, even every week.

We were looking forward to how weekly reception of the body and blood of Christ would shape our Maundy Thursday communion service and how the whole experience might shape how we understand the relationship between communion and worship--not just in Lent but all times of the year. I was feeling more and more certain that communion would become a meaningful part of our regular worship gatherings.

The breaking of bread as it's called is obviously right at the heart of the gospel story. On the night when Jesus was betrayed, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. "This is my body," he said. In the same way he took the chalice of wine and said to his disciples, "This is the new covenant in my blood."

For two millennia, Christians have been breaking bread and sharing wine and repeating those same words as they do so. This is Christ's body. This is Christ's blood. And for just as long, just about, Christians have been debating what it means to say what they say when they break the bread and say "This is Christ's body". Communion continues to be understood and practiced in many different ways. It's called communion and Eucharist and the Lord's Supper. For some people, the table is the place where Jesus is met in the earthly elements of bread and wine now transformed into his flesh and blood. Others see the table as a memorial in which believers recall the saving action of Jesus and give thanks for it. For others, eating Jesus' broken body is the occasion to imitate Christ by participating in his suffering for the world. For still others, it is the place where Christ's offering of himself invites a transformation of eaters so that their lives can become an offering to others, too. It is the site where people, having consumed Jesus as their food and drink, are re-created by Christ and so taste a slice of heaven. (Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith*, 149).

Clearly, in the very simple act of breaking bread, the most human of acts according to Henri Nouwen, Christians have discovered the deepest and widest spiritual significance.

And we were, too. We were discovering deep and wide spiritual significance. That's not to say that every time we receive communion, we have an ecstatic experience. But sometimes, we do. Whether we do or we do not, it's another way of remembering we are not in control; we come with nothing more than faith and open hands to a Mystery.

That is, when we can come. But now that's been taken away from us at least for a while. I'm not sure we could have picked a worse time to begin having communion every week when now not only are we not supposed to be within a few feet of one another, but how exactly is communion shared in a pandemic? How is communion shared when there is no gathered community? It's a puzzle. It's more than a puzzle. It's a grief.

This week's reading from Acts 2 reminds us of the full-hearted communal life shared by the early Christians. The early church is the mold, the model, the plumb line. In the early, spontaneous days of the church's life, warmed by the embers of Pentecost's holy fire, those first Christians were a true community; they were together; they lived sacrificially and generously. And God blessed them and magnified their witness. Even if the description may be idealized, it is inspirational. This is what true church can look like. Over the centuries since then Christians have returned to the model of the early church time and time again seeking inspiration for renewal.

When the church gets too institutionalized—look to the communal focus of the early church: devoted to fellowship, *koinonia*. When the church gets loose from its theological anchors—look to the teachings of the apostles with the early church. When the church gets too self-interested—look to the generosity of the early church—who shared all things in common, and sold what they had to give to all who had need. When the church gets too worldly—look to the praise of God constantly on the lips of the early church. When the church gets discouraged—see how God added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

The early church didn't have buildings, budgets, programs or even yet have a developed eucharistic theology, and yet, "day by day, breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts." Of all the manifestly significant things they did, one of the most profound was also the simplest. What makes the Mystery so powerful is just how ordinary it is. Let's not forget that the supper was a meal. Jesus is raised from the dead. Redemption has come. God is here. Let's eat. And so, they ate—with joy and generosity. They seemed to have grasped intuitively that "in Christ, life in all its totality was returned to man, given again as sacrament and communion, made Eucharist. (Schmemmann, 28)."

We find ourselves in a season when we know that we ought not practice the ritual of the eucharist—for good reasons. That is indeed a grief. It is also a teacher, reminding us that the supper of our Lord was, and still is, also a meal—any meal, every meal. About 50 years ago in his book *For the Life of the World*, Alexander Schmemmann expresses the heart of Christian faith for young believers. "Man is a hungry being. But he is hungry for God. Behind all the hunger of our life is God. All desire is finally a desire for God. To be sure, [humans are] not the only hungry beings. All that exists lives by eating. The whole creation depends on food. But the unique position of [humans] in the universe is that they alone are to bless God for the food and life received from him. Humans alone are to respond to God's blessing with their blessing . . . They stand in the center of the world and unify it in the act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God—and by filling the world with this Eucharist, human life,

the one that receives from the world, is transformed into life in God, into communion with him. The world was created as the 'matter', the material of one all-embracing eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament. (*Life of the World*, 21-22; attempts made to represent the language gender neutral when possible)

So, my brothers and sisters, wherever you are today, fellow priests of the Incarnation . . .  
wherever eating is something more than strictly fueling up the body. . .  
wherever food is treated with reverence, and the lives and deaths of the creatures that make food possible are treated with respect. . .  
wherever those who prepare and serve the food are honored for their craft and labor. . .  
wherever food is received with gladness, for all food is a gift. . .  
wherever food is shared, for no one ought to go to bed hungry. . .  
wherever people bow their heads to pray thanksgiving for daily bread. . .

. . . then let us say: this, too, is the Table of the Lord.  
The body of Christ broken for you.  
Take and eat.

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