“The Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper”

Acts 4:32-37

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My earliest recollections of communion are vague at best. I remember sitting in the pew of St Stephen’s Episcopal Church. I remember folding down the kneeler at my feet, careful not to crush anyone’s ankles in the process. There were certain prayers we had to say before we had communion. There were lots of words. The priests up front would prepare the elements in a beautifully choreographed manner. It may as well have been a demonstration on how to set a table for an elegant meal. Although instead of a woman in heels and pearls explaining how to fold a napkin or listing what flowers go best with each occasion, there were the two priests. They stood up front saying these words that Christ said so many years ago. This is my body broken for you, do this in remembrance of me…

And then we would be invited up front, where we would once again kneel. The first priest would travel down the row, offering the bread to each outstretched hand. The second priest would follow close behind with the cup. Offering it to the lips of each person at the altar. It was always wine in the cup. I would take a cringe inducing sip and hope that the priest had sufficiently wiped down the cup where the previous sipper had sipped. My five year old mind was preoccupied by germs, more so than the meaning of what I was participating in.

Not a lot changed when my family switched to the Presbyterian Church. The routine was a bit different. It wasn’t quite so formal. There was no kneeling involved. Instead of being handed a torn off piece of bread, we selected a pre-sliced cube of bread from a basket. There was always an assortment of flavors, from white to wheat to rye. Instead of sipping from one cup of wine, we got to dunk our bread in the juice. My eight year old mind was preoccupied by the challenge of not sticking my fingers in the juice, more so than the meaning of what I was participating in.

In the years that would follow, I would continue to participate in this sacrament, not fully understanding what I was doing and what it all meant. I would eventually go through confirmation as a teenager, where our pastor attempted to explain how it worked. I’m afraid much of it went over my head. I could never quite understand how the bread was Christ’s body and the cup was Christ’s blood. I was told that we Presbyterians believe in the “real presence” of Christ in the elements. Not a literal presence like other traditions. But also not merely a symbolic gesture. My fourteen year old mind was preoccupied with trying to figure out the logistics of the sacrament, more so than the meaning of what I was participating in.

During my time at seminary, countless hours were spent examining the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Weeks worth of classes. Pages upon pages of term papers. All of it an attempt at understanding this ritual we do in worship. We looked at the very bloody history of the church, when wars were fought over the proper way to do communion. Nations and churches were torn apart over the proper understanding of communion. It’s not a very pretty history. Even after all of that exposure to the teachings on communion, I still don’t have a full grasp of it. But now, my thirty year old mind is working toward appreciating the meaning of what I’m participating in, more so than gaining full understanding.

Like I said, I’m working on it, but I’m not quite there.

I do take comfort in knowing that some of the greatest minds and most faithful Christians lived with this same mental obstacle. C.S. Lewis is among those who admitted to the struggle. He never came to terms with how the sacrament works, exactly. He wrestled with the tension, wondering if the elements themselves are Christ, or are they mere symbols. He struggled to understand what this meal is all about. But it seems his final conclusion was one of accepting his ignorance. Embracing his limited understand. He wrote that after all, “the command was to take, eat. Not take, understand.”

It may seem odd to place so much importance on a ritual that we don’t fully understand. Would it be more fitting to have full understanding of it before partaking?

I’m not convinced that it would be.

Because the heart of our tradition is faith seeking understanding. We proclaim that great is the mystery of faith. We practice our faith, come to the Table, follow Christ, without full understanding. Because we trust that what we are participating in is an act of love and obedience. We trust that Christ placed this commandment before us, to eat the bread and drink of the cup, because he knows that it is good for us. He knows that we need it.

We need this reminder of what it means to live in Christ. We need to feel the bread on our tongues and experience the quenching reach of the cup. We need this sign and seal of our communion with Christ. We need this Thanksgiving meal which reminds us of what God has done for us. We need this sacrament to help us realize forgiveness. We need this Table to renew us, sustain us and ultimately seal us in the covenant of God’s love. We need this meal to serve as a reminder of where we have been. We need the elements to offer us a hopeful picture of where we are going. We need this Table to show us that we are loved, regardless of our race or sex or gender or age or economic status or social class or handicapping condition or difference of culture or language or any barrier created by human injustice. We need to know that all are welcome at the Table of our Lord.

Those early disciples and followers of Christ caught on to this reality. Everything they did revolved around communion. The breaking of bread and drinking of the cup. They recognized the transformative power of the Lord’s Supper. That when they walked away from the Table, they were a changed people. They saw the world through the lens of love.

We are told in Acts that the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions. Everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

This sacrament urged them toward generosity and care for their neighbors. Ensuring that all were fed and clothed and housed. That no one had a need unmet. By doing so, they brought an authentic image of the Kingdom of God to earth.

There are several modern day examples of this. Christian communities taking the call of the Lord’s Supper seriously. Living into the Table’s gesture toward love and grace.

One such example is First Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. This church was drawing a diverse group of people each week, but the pastor found that they were struggling to find common ground with each other. He decided to start a weekly communion service on Fridays at noon. The people would gather for prayer, and then partake of the Lord’s Supper, something that was not typically done in their tradition. But what they found was a building sense of unity each week as they gathered. They came to realize that even if they didn’t have anything in common, none of that mattered at the communion table. All of their differences were set aside and they were united in Christ. They were spiritually fed and realized a new sense of community they hadn’t previously experienced. Pastor Aaron said “To watch that line and to watch white and black, old and young, poor and rich dipping their hands [into the cup] together — it’s the Kingdom of God,”[[1]](#footnote-1)

When we celebrate communion, we are participating in a sacred act which transcends earthly understanding. At the Table we are united together, the body of Christ, a loving community. We are called to set aside our fixation on understanding and simply obey Christ’s call to us. To love one another. To share everything we have, just as those first disciples did. To eat and drink together, celebrating our kinship in the family of Christ. Thereby claiming grace and hope and love in our midst. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. https://baptistnews.com/ministry/congregations/item/29551-weekly-communion-heals-unites-church-and-community#sthash.AQ4Lw0nX.dpuf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)