

Communion as Thanksgiving and Celebration

Luke 22:7-23

November 6, 2022

First Presbyterian, Luling

I'll have more to say about what I learned last week on study leave, but for today, I want to share with you what we ate. That's important, right? Each day began with a big breakfast. Sausage, bacon, biscuits or pancakes, grits or gravy, homemade jellies and jams, three dozen scrambled eggs. Then just in case we weren't full from that, there were snacks. Pretty soon, it was time for lunch, which no one prepared but we could grab anything we could find in the kitchen. More snacks in the afternoon. One member of the group enjoys cooking complicated things, so he was in charge of the kitchen for supper. A shrimp gumbo one night. The next night hummus with lamb or chicken. Grilled venison backstrap and sausage, alongside quiche, of all things. Mediterranean meatloaf and garlic mashed potatoes. Homemade dessert every night.

It was not a hardship, and my own cooking at home has seemed plain and uninspired this week. And worse than that, I have had to be the one to decide what to make. But our meals at home, when we manage to get all four of us around the table, are almost always full of conversation and laughter, which is a feast itself.

Today, as we frequently do, we'll gather around the Lord's Table, and we'll have our own version of a feast. The food is neither fancy nor uninspired, but rather ordinary and blessed. The host and fellow guests are more than we can see with our eyes, and we'll have a celebration.

For these three Sundays from now till Advent begins on Thanksgiving weekend, we'll have a short sermon series on the sacraments. This week we'll talk about sacraments in general, as well as thinking about the themes of thanksgiving and celebration at the Table. Other communion themes we'll save for next week. And then on the 20th, we'll talk about baptism.

Presbyterians, of course, recognize only the two sacraments of baptism and communion, while our Catholic siblings recognize seven. St. Augustine called sacraments "outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace," and John Calvin, from whom we trace our theological heritage, said much the same, that the two sacraments are "visible words" that strengthen our discipleship.¹ Communion and baptism, bread and wine and water, are concrete, tangible signs

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/sacraments/>

of God's presence and God's grace. God communicates the same message of grace through sacraments as through the word read and proclaimed, but it's in a different way. God speaks differently. We receive differently.

In my work with the Presbytery, I'm often talking with churches whose pastor has recently departed, and a new one has not yet arrived. I know this church has often been in that very situation. Are they concerned about the preaching? Yes, some. Are they concerned about who will moderate a Session meeting? Not at all. But what really worries them, what really gets their stress levels up, is the thought of not being able to celebrate communion. We're able to help them make arrangements so that doesn't happen, but it has touched me, to see how important the sacraments are to peoples' faith.

When I used to teach classes for confirmation, I would ask the teenagers what their favorite part of worship was. Almost without exception, they would say communion. It's the part of worship that engages more than just our ears. We see, we taste, we hear, we join together with the congregation and *do* something. In a world and a denomination that values thoughts and words and logical, systematic thinking, the sacraments remind us that there's more to us than that. Our other senses, our souls, also worship.

This week, let's take a couple minutes to think about communion as thanksgiving and as celebration. Another word for communion is "eucharist," which you may hear in Catholic or Episcopalian circles. It comes from the Greek verb meaning "to give thanks," and remembers Jesus's actions that we read from Luke. Jesus gave thanks for the bread, before he broke it and gave it to the disciples. At its heart, communion is a meal of thanksgiving, an opportunity to give thanks together, not just individually, but together, for all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ. This time of year, thanksgiving comes more easily to us, but stopping to give God thanks is a good idea at any time, and an especially good thing as we come to the table. In more liturgically formal congregations, there's a prayer that precedes the sacrament of communion, called the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving. Sections of it retell the story of God's faithfulness through generations and generations, and gives thanks. We do the same in a less formal way.

Communion as celebration is a little harder for us, I think. We frequently say that we are "celebrating" the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, but it rarely looks like a party. People tend to approach the table somberly, silently, introspectively. There's good reason for those approaches, and we'll talk about that next week. One of my favorite things about Presbytery meetings used to be

when we celebrated communion. Not always, but almost always, we would all go up the center aisle to receive the bread and cup, and then go back to our seats. In a full, large sanctuary, that creates a parade of sorts. I would sit and watch beloved friends and colleagues, offering discreet waves sometimes, and it felt like a celebration, a celebration that we could join together. Since the pandemic, we've celebrated communion, but with those horrid little pre-packaged wafers and juice cups. There's no parade, and it doesn't feel so much like a party. I can be patient, I guess, and hold out hope for the meetings yet to come.

We *celebrate* because communion began as a celebration, the commemoration of Passover. It has echoes of countless places in Scripture where heaven itself is depicted as a giant banquet, with people coming together from all nations to celebrate with joy together.

As we come to the table today, let's do so intentionally with thanksgiving in our hearts, with celebration even in the midst of sorrow.