

What Are We Doing in Communion?

Text: Luke 24:13-35

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 2, 2021

Many years ago, a woman who was considering membership in the church I was serving came to meet with me. When she arrived, she had a stack of about 45 pages she had printed off the internet in her hand. Throwing it down on the coffee table she said, "What the [bleep] is this?"

Well, I had no idea what it was, so I looked. It was a document put out by the United Methodist Church about our understanding of Holy Communion. My bishop at the time had been part of the group that crafted the document, so I was familiar with it. "This is ridiculous," she continued, "Is it the body of Christ, or isn't it?" Theological purists will be horrified to learn that I responded, "It is." "Good," she said, and she went on to join the church.

It's not that I haven't studied the nuanced differences between transubstantiation, consubstantiation, sacraments, ordinances, and all the other very particular understandings of what is actually happening at the celebration of the Eucharist. It's not that I don't know that Christian denominations have split multiple times over those differences. And in a 21st congregation in Massachusetts, where a good crop of folks, including myself, began life as something other than United Methodists, I'm not at all surprised that a ritual so central to every Christian community would come up as a question for our series.

But I've also noticed that what a person believes about the technical meaning of what is happening during Communion has no bearing whatsoever on that person's ability to live a faithful Christian life. What **does** have an impact on a person's faith is being told you're not welcome to eat at a table where Jesus is host and having the body of Christ fractured because some Christians think other Christians aren't understanding what they're doing in the right way.

Were it up to me, I would boil that 45-page document down to one line that says, "Everyone is welcome at the table," which is the only part of United Methodist eucharistic doctrine that, I think, matters beyond your grade in seminary and your interview with the Board of Ordained Ministry. When the day comes that we each arrive at the Pearly Gates, we won't have to pass a theology exam to enter. We won't have to recite Bible verses. It will be only our capacity for love as evidenced in our lives that will be our witness.

We Christians are very caught up in how to think about this or that. In my reading of the Bible, the only test of right thinking is whether it produces the fruit of the Spirit in our lived experience. Church should not be a place where you have to check your brain at the door, and when intellectual ideas lead to rotten fruit, they need to be challenged and reformed. If I'm debating a Catholic about Communion, it's not going to be about transubstantiation and real presence. It's going to be about who is welcome at the table.

But too often today, especially in the West, church has become a place where **only** the brain gets to participate. There are other means of knowing, other modes of understanding; and I think we see an example of that in the post-resurrection story read earlier from Luke. Jesus walks all the way to Emmaus with two men, talking about Scripture—head stuff. It's apparently an interesting conversation, but it doesn't allow them to see Jesus. They walk all that way—7.5 miles—with the Son of God opening the Scriptures to them, and they haven't got a clue who their traveling companion is.

When are their eyes opened? When do they see Jesus? When Jesus **DOES** something, when he breaks the bread. It is only **AFTER** they encounter Jesus in the action of breaking bread—the ritual action that preceded every Jewish meal—that they remember what he **SAID** earlier on the road.

Don't miss this. For a long time, we Christians have tried to talk people into faith. We quote Scripture to them, we explain about the Cross, and only after they tell us they believe these things, do we invite them to the

actions, "Believer's" baptism, or the ritual meal of Communion where God has promised to meet us. Well, suppose the road to Emmaus is telling us that this is backwards. Suppose we need to encounter Jesus in the waters of baptism and the breaking of the bread BEFORE we can even begin to understand Scripture or doctrine.

This notion is a part of the Wesleyan heritage. John Wesley, who founded Methodism in the 18th century, fought hard to retain infant baptism and promoted what is called "open communion"—anyone could come to the table. He didn't restrict it to those who could recite correct doctrine, who had no sin, or who could explain what was happening. On the contrary, it was precisely FOR sinners who did not understand. Why? Because Wesley could see that it was in the DOING and not in the thinking that Christ was to be encountered. He believed that we could only understand grace in our heads by experiencing it first in the flesh—by experiencing God's welcome at the table, totally apart from whether or not anyone deemed us worthy. We come to the table—not BECAUSE we understand, but in order that we MIGHT understand by meeting Jesus Christ in the breaking of the bread.

Once we include all of our bodies and not just our minds, other parts of Communion begin to look a little different, too. Jesus said "Do this in remembrance of me." What does it mean to remember? Most of us immediately think of—what else—thinking. To remember is to go into our minds and think about the past. We might even close our eyes to make sure nothing pulls us out of our minds so that we can try to imagine the shapes, the colors, the places, and see them in our heads. But what does remembering look like when we include the rest of us?

What happens when you lose something and thinking does not help you remember? Don't you actually go to the places where you have been? You must have done this—"Let's see...I was in the kitchen" and you go to the kitchen, "and then I walked into the dining room," and you walk into the dining room, "and then I went down the hall...no, wait a minute...I turned here and went into the bathroom--here it is!" Your memory was enriched by actually doing what you had done before. There are many examples of this sort of thing. Crimes are reenacted to aid the memory of victims or witnesses. Therapists help us reenact scenes from our lives to help us remember and to promote healing.

But these reenactments don't just help our thinking, they allow us to experience the event. This means that by acting something out, not only can we experience a past event again, but we can experience events where we were not actually present. Have you ever been to a historical site? My house in Maryland was a 150-year-old farmhouse that had been used as a station on the Underground Railroad. In the floor of an upstairs closet was a trapdoor that led down a ladder into a hidden room where those running from a life of slavery were hidden as they escaped to the north. I had read about such places, and had thought about them—I remembered what they were. But to enter that house—to live there—was a completely different thing.

As I went down through the trap door into that room, I could almost feel the tension and fear of someone on the run. I listened for noise on the road—for pounding on the door and demands to search the house, the creaking wheels of a hay wagon, a gentle tapping on the door, and then a whispered password and the click of a lock. I could almost smell the warm bodies, huddled in both fear and hope, down in that small room. I couldn't walk through that house without being a part of the people who had lived there before me—without remembering in a way that was very different from plain thought.

And this is the fuller meaning of Jesus' words, "Do this in remembrance of me. Listen to it: DO this in remembrance of me. Not THINK about me, but DO this in order that you might remember. And as we do this—as we reenact what happened, not just at the Last Supper, but also at Emmaus and at every other meal with Jesus, the same mysterious thing happens that would happen to me in my Maryland house.

We reach out our hands to receive the bread, and suddenly they are more than just our hands. Suddenly, they are the hands of the disciples in Emmaus who have just recognized their Lord among them. They are the hands of the twelve in the upper room. And it doesn't stop there. Christians have been celebrating the Lord's Supper for almost 2,000 years. My hands are also the hands of St. Paul, of Joan of Arc, of Luther, of Wesley, of Jeanette Li, of Martin Luther King, of Mother Teresa, of Oscar Romero. My hands are black hands and white hands, Lutheran hands and Baptist hands, and they are the hands of Christians yet to be born. They are the hands of sinners and because Jesus also ate the bread, they are the hands of God.

Communion is the ACT that makes us the Body of Christ. It is the act that brings us together and unites us across space and time. It's not about how we think as individuals, but about who we ARE as a group. It is about our identity, not about our thinking. It's a way of knowing that is beyond thought. We can't THINK Jesus into our midst anymore than we can THINK a departed loved one back from the grave. Ah, but when we begin to get out of our heads and start to DO, we experience things that happen in no other way.

When I was a child in Rhode Island, my father liked to take me out driving in the snow. As soon as the snow would start, he would call me and we would get into the car and go. It was always beautiful, especially at night, when you could watch the snow dashing into the headlights, curving down toward the car like a sparkling white road that led up into the sky.

My father has been dead 40 years now, but he lives and is present with me whenever the snow begins to fall, and I get into my car and drive. I can think about him, but he is not present in the same way that he is in the snow, or when I read one of his letters or touch something that belonged to him. I know many of you experience that kind of presence when you sit in a certain chair, revisit a place, read a letter, or hold a picture that has a physical connection to someone you loved and lost.

To me, this is part of the holy mystery of Communion. God is with us always, and Jesus makes a home within our hearts, but Jesus is present with us in a special way when we come to the table, and we are present with each other and with all Christians of all time, as we share this special meal. The others are all here—the Communion of Saints we call it—and they join their hands with ours at the table. We are one body with them, with each other, with God. At this time of such deep division in the nation and in the world, I can't think of any ritual that is more needed right now.

This act is who we are; the Body of Christ—one bread, one body. I don't know that because of a course in theology or because I've thought about it for a long time. I know it because I once joined a frightened woman in a secret room and felt a dead man live again on a snowy night. Come with me—out of your minds and to the table of our Lord Jesus Christ. **Do** this in remembrance of me.

Amen.