

Table Talk

Luke 22:19-20 CEB After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰ In the same way, he took the cup after the meal and said, "This cup is the new covenant by my blood, which is poured out for you.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17, CEB Isn't the cup of blessing that we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Isn't the loaf of bread that we break a sharing in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Since there is one loaf of bread, we who are many are one body, because we all share the one loaf of bread.

11:19-25 It's necessary that there are groups among you, to make it clear who is genuine. ²⁰ So when you get together in one place, it isn't to eat the Lord's meal. ²¹ Each of you goes ahead and eats a private meal. One person goes hungry while another is drunk. ²² Don't you have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you look down on God's churches and humiliate those who have nothing? What can I say to you? Will I praise you? No, I don't praise you in this. ²³ I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. ²⁴ After giving thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me." ²⁵ He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me."

Table Talk

When I was a child we went to a church that had communion every Sunday. Solemn men in dark suits stood at the table and there was talk about blood, death, sacrifice, remembering, and the dangers of being unworthy to participate. With grim faces and complete silence the trays of bread and juice were passed around. It could be pretty scary! In many churches, not much has changed since then. But the more I've thought about this sacrament, the more it seems to me that we have robbed it of its power to inspire and strengthen us.

First, we shuck away all the context of communion and we reduce the words to a thin, literal meaning. For instance, "blood" can just be blood, but it had a broader and richer meaning for the ancient Jews. Among the earliest rules of the Hebrews is this statement in Leviticus 17:14. "Again: for every creature's life, its blood is its life. That is why I have told the Israelites: You must not consume any creature's blood because every creature's life is its blood. Anyone who consumes it will be cut off." Two things are important, here. The life of an animal is understood to reside in its blood. Blood equals life. And consuming blood is strictly forbidden. We still use phrases that link blood to life. We might say that the big three auto makers were the life blood of Detroit, and when they were in trouble financially, Detroit almost died. In the same way, TFI was the life blood of Thomasville. Sometimes in scripture, the word "blood" is used to mean or imply "life." Drinking blood was revolting but partaking of the life of the new covenant was a blessing.

Consider the word "bread." On the one hand, Jesus said that we aren't nourished and sustained by bread alone, but by the instruction we are given by God. (Matthew 4:4) In another passage, Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." (John 6:48) We are strengthened and made whole, we are fed the life that is truly life by Jesus.

The apostle Paul mixes several metaphors. "Isn't the loaf of bread that we break a sharing in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Since there is one loaf of bread, we who are many are one body, because we all share the one loaf of bread." (1 Cor. 10:16-17) Paul often refers to the church as the body of Christ and here he is saying that our sharing a loaf of bread in communion is a way that we are unified in the church, in the body of Christ. So we see that the words "blood," "bread," and "body" are rich in meaning and often are used as metaphors.

We also short change the word “remember.” Jesus said that when we eat the bread and drink the cup, we are to remember him. We often act like this means we are to remember that Jesus was betrayed, arrested, and crucified. But remembering isn’t just recalling a short period of time and some traumatic events. Perhaps when you smell or taste a particular food, maybe apple pie or macaroni and cheese, it takes you back to your grandmother’s cooking. But your remembering doesn’t stop there. You’re transported in memory back to seeing her face, feeling her hugs, seeing the table loaded with food for Thanksgiving, picturing the brisk fall weather and aunts and uncles and cousins by the dozens. And you think about how family molded you and how family traditions continue into the present day. The act of remembering flavors and defines the unfolding story of your family.

In Paul’s letters to the church in Corinth he is writing to Christians who were mostly Romans and who lived in a Roman city with Roman culture. The church met in a home, not a sanctuary, and a meal was part of the gathering. The typical Roman house or villa could only accommodate nine people reclining at the table. The Roman way of having guests for a meal would put the honored guests at the table where they were served the best food and best wine. Lesser guests would have to sit or stand in the atrium and they would eat lesser food.

It seems that this pecking order of hospitality is employed when the church met to celebrate the Lord’s Supper – and Paul is upset about this. Paul says, “Each of you goes ahead and eats a private meal. One person goes hungry while another is drunk.” What’s wrong with this picture? Eating a private meal is not eating in communion, in community. It’s selfish. It shows disregard for others who are their brothers and sisters in Christ. It may even be an expression of contempt for the poorer members of the congregation. It’s an insult to the poor. Some people are eating all the food and drinking all the wine and leaving others to go hungry.

The apostle Peter learned that God was no respecter of persons. Paul taught that in Christ there was neither slave nor free, male nor female, Jew nor Greek. And Jesus, who they were supposed to be remembering, had compassion for Roman officers, widows, children, Samaritans, the handicapped, thieves, and prostitutes. In fact, his compassion wasn’t even dependent on their being his disciples.

But some of the congregation in Corinth, while they weren’t actively being cruel to others, they were mistreating other members by sins of omission, failing to love and act compassionately. Thus they violated the very body, the life of Christ that they were to remember. By showing disregard for those who had nothing they acted as though Christ’s life and death hadn’t changed their own relationships with other people. The meal that should have been an expression of oneness had become an occasion when some were shamed by others. And if members of the body of Christ were being treated that way, how were they treating everybody else?

It is only after we have understood what was going on in Corinth and Paul’s criticism that we can understand the admonition he gives in verses 27-29. “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.”

These verses have been so misused and so misunderstood. People have fretted over how to perform the ritual of communion correctly. There have been rules about the bread and the wine that must be used. There have been strict rules about the frequency of offering communion and even about the color of the tablecloth and the flowers. People have argued over the fine points of sacramental theology. In the middle ages people were so scared of partaking unworthily and eating and drinking damnation on themselves that the church had to

require that people take communion at least once a year. There was a time when Presbyterian elders visited every family in the congregation to determine if they were righteous enough to receive communion. Some churches today only let members of their individual congregation participate in communion. Whether motivated by fear or by self-righteousness, Christians have often ignored the warning not to judge others when it came to communion.

But when we read about unworthiness and eating and drinking judgment on ourselves in the context of Paul's message to the Corinthians, we see that eating unworthily is to eat in a way that provokes division. Self-scrutiny is about considering how our actions affect others. Discerning the body is about recognizing what the church is called to be – the unified body of Christ. The problem isn't desecration of the sacred elements but rather offence against Christ and the life he led. We are a people called to live in response to divine generosity, to live sacrificially, not pursuing our own interests and pleasures, but giving ourselves for others in remembrance of the one who gave himself for us. Communion is an offer of grace, not a trap for condemnation.

Jesus told us to eat the bread and drink the cup to remember him. It isn't just about remembering a Thursday night supper in an upper room. It's not just about recalling a betrayal and an excruciating death. It isn't about solemn silence and meticulous ritual. Those things rob communion of its richness and power.

By remembering Jesus, his kindness, his love, his compassion for those who suffered – by remembering his teaching, his joy, his acceptance and love for all people – by remembering his total trust in God – by remembering the breadth, depth, and fullness of Christ, we can be inspired and strengthened to live as his brothers and sisters, walking in the path he walked, continuing the work that he did. Amen.

Remember Christ's life – all of it!
Remember his love.
Remember his trust in God.
Remember, and be inspired to follow.

⁹ Don't lie to each other. Take off the old human nature with its practices ¹⁰ and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it.

¹¹ In this image there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people. ¹² Therefore, as God's choice, holy and loved, put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. ¹³ Be tolerant with each other and, if someone has a complaint against anyone, forgive each other. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other. ¹⁴ And over all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. (Col 3:9-14 CEB)

This was Mike's last sermon before his retirement on June 30, 2015.