Spirituality
Scripture for Life

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In the days when Catholics fasted from midnight before receiving Communion and were convinced that the odds were quite slim that Protestants would go to heaven, my mother had great admiration for a Lutheran friend of hers. Mom told me, “The Lutherans don’t receive Communion every week, but when they do, Maxine spends her Saturday preparing for it. I think she may be even more serious than we are about it.” Today’s feast calls us into a serious consideration of our eucharistic celebration.

Today, the First Letter to the Corinthians gives us Christianity’s most ancient account of Jesus’ last supper. Ironically, Paul wrote about Jesus’ blessing of bread and wine, not to give his people a liturgical formula or a holy story, but as part of one of the harshest reprimands he ever gave one of his communities.

Paul was more than angry over what he had heard about the Corinthian community. He started his letter by upbraiding them for their rivalries and divisions, then for their silly pride and lack of concern about sexual misconduct in their midst. He decried all sorts of faults, but saved his strongest denunciation for their celebrations of the Eucharist.

Among the Corinthians, the Lord’s Supper had become an event where socialites could eat well and flaunt their position while their brothers and sisters in Christ, whose social status didn’t measure up, were relegated to the first century’s equivalent of the children’s table in the kitchen. For that, Paul accuses the haughty of showing contempt for the church of God. He caps it off with the statement, “In giving this instruction, I do not praise the fact that your meetings are doing more harm than good” (1 Corinthians 11:17). He then reminded them of what the Lord’s Supper is all about.

We know how Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it. Paul reminds us that Jesus identified the bread with his body, his gift of self, and the cup with the new covenant in his own blood. With the bread and the wine, Paul repeats Jesus’ phrase in Luke, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

By emphasizing “remembrance,” Paul called on his peoples’ religious imagination and experience. For the Jews of his day, memory had the power to bring the past into the present with such force that people who were born long after an event could truly feel part of it. (Remembering Christ’s promises for the future allows the past to influence the present in a similar way.) We might say that among these people religious memory was not an intellectual activity but a power that allowed them to participate in what had formed their people in ages past.

Paul told his people that Jesus had instituted his communal meal so that everyone could continue to participate at that Last Supper table with him. At that table, they could never be mere observers; they would always be active participants.

Once we understand what memory meant in this context, we need to ask what Jesus wanted when he said, “Do this in memory of me.” What was he asking his disciples to do? What was “this”?

Apparently, the Corinthians had decided that when Jesus said “do this,” he meant to bless and to eat and drink in imitation of his gestures and words. Somehow, as they learned about Jesus, they had failed to catch on that he was not a fan of words and rituals that didn’t signify profound commitment. They apparently thought that repeating a pattern of prayers made them into a Christian community; where the poor sat and how much they had to eat seemed irrelevant.

Paul informed them that their style of meal practice had nothing to do with remembering Jesus, the one who gave his life for others — including his enemies.

When Jesus said “do this in memory of me,” he was referring to giving himself, to pouring out his life’s blood for the sake of others, not to a menu, a prayer formula, or a set of gestures. To take, bless and break bread in Jesus’ name implies the commitment to be in communion with his self-giving. Thus, Paul said, “As often as you eat this bread … you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.” The only genuine way to proclaim Jesus’ death is to live in readiness to participate in it.

Paul was so adamant about the implications of participating in the Lord’s Supper that he went on to say, “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:27).

There are no observers’ seats at the table of the Eucharist. Whether we participate daily or only after long, serious preparation, Paul tells us that as often as we eat this bread and drink the cup, we recommit ourselves to proclaim the death of the Lord by our very lives.

GENESIS 14:18-20

This is an odd passage inserted in the Abraham saga. Melchizedek appears out of nowhere, an intruder in the story of how Abraham rescued Lot, his kidnapped kinsman, from foreign kings. The reasons we remember him include the facts that he was a king and priest of Jerusalem (Salem), and he offered Abraham bread and wine. Contrary to our expectations, the bread and wine have nothing to do with sacrifice; they are most likely a sign of the hospitality typical of desert peoples. The most important element of the story is that Melchizedek, a priest who did not serve Abraham’s God, blessed Abraham. The Hebrew tradition picked up on this story and refers to it again in Psalm 110, a song which may have been composed around the same time as the Genesis narrative.

Melchizedek stands out among the foreigners who appear in the Hebrew Scriptures for a number of reasons. His name means something like “the king of justice,” and in contrast to the Hebrew tradition, he functioned as both a king and a priest. According to the account, at the time of Abraham, he ruled over Salem, commonly understood to be Jerusalem, the city that would become the capitol of Abraham’s promised land. Finally, Melchizedek was mysterious. Not only did he appear unexpectedly and then vanish from the scriptural narrative, but there is no mention of his genealogy.

The Letter to the Hebrews interpreted Melchizedek as a prefigurement of Christ for many of the reasons mentioned above. The most important of them was that like him, Jesus was of a royal, not a priestly lineage. The priesthood they exercised came from their God-given power to bless rather than from accidents of birth.

PSALMS 110:1, 2, 3, 4

Psalm 110 is formally an “enthronement psalm” celebrating the coronation of a king. It is the psalm most often quoted in the Christian Scriptures, primarily because it is so apt a description of the victorious Christ. This psalm is one of the sources of the image of Christ seated at the right hand of God — an expression indicating that he shares in God’s own power and authority.

With the refrain and the last verse, the psalm again leads us to reflect on Christ’s royal priesthood. A royal priesthood was rarely the ideal in Judaism which clung to the advantages of what we might call separation of powers, preventing the king from assuming religious power. But the early church saw the risen Christ fulfilling both roles.

In the light of the first reading, this psalm urges us to reflect on that priesthood — the priesthood of the faithful as well as the cultic priesthood — as a status recognized for the blessings one imparts more than the titles a person may claim.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-26

Paul will never let us get away with mere words. Faith is not something we say, but something that has meaning only to the extent that it is incarnate. When our words say one thing and our life another, Paul calls us on it in no uncertain terms.

In 1 Corinthians 10:17, Paul begins a passionate monologue, warning the Corinthians that they are making a sacrilege of their celebration of the Lord's Supper. The first problem he cites is the fact that they are treating their liturgy like a social event that expresses and reinforces their society's class divisions. A chosen few get the places of honor, choice food and more than enough drink, while others are relegated to the patio for the leftovers and box wine. Paul finishes off that section, effectively evicting them from the celebration and sending them home where they can socialize as they please without pretending that it has anything to do with Christianity.

After saying that, Paul goes on to remind the Corinthians about the Lord's last meal, the supper that their celebrations desecrate. When Paul says that he received what he is passing on to them, he indicates that what he is about to say is not his opinion, but the core of their tradition. Therefore, he chooses his words with utmost care.

"On the night he was handed over." Beginning with that phrase, Paul reminds us that Jesus was not a victim of fate but was handed over by his own people and that his availability to be handed over gave witness to God's unremitting love. It is precisely in the context of creating an unforgettable, ever-repeatable sign of love that Jesus took the bread and cup, saying that they represented his entire self, given for them in the new covenant.

As a good Jew, Paul understood that when Jesus blessed the bread and wine as he did, he was praying a new variation on the traditional meal blessing prayer that recognized the fruit of the earth and vine as signs of God's love and election of Israel. By saying that they signified his life given for them, Jesus was claiming/proclaiming that his life and coming death were the ultimate expression of God's everlasting plan of salvation. (You can find a modern version of these prayers at: www.reformjudaism.org.)

Paul's account of Jesus' actions with the bread and wine is the oldest Last Supper narrative we have. The First Letter to the Corinthians probably predates the earliest Gospel by a decade or more. One of the unique features of Paul's account is his emphasis on memory. Although, unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke does quote Jesus as saying, "Do this in remembrance of me," Paul quotes Jesus as saying it twice. This remembrance echoes the instructions for the celebration of the Passover. In the Hebrew mindset, such a remembrance was not simply a memory or recollection, but it was a reliving or actualization of the original event. When they remembered the Passover, they made themselves a part of it and cherished it in their collective memory. Thus, Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of me," was a command to remain in communion with him.

LUKE 9:11b-17

This is Luke's rendition of the most popular story in the Christian Scriptures. Variations on this miraculous meal appear six times in the Gospels: twice in Matthew and Mark and once each in Luke and John. It was obviously important to the earliest Christian communities. (Whereas Luke does not repeat this story, he adds the eucharistic meal at Emmaus to his Resurrection accounts.)

First of all, there is no doubt that they remembered this story as an account of the Eucharist. Every one of the accounts includes the solemn words about how Jesus took the food, blessed and broke, and gave it to those present. In contrast to the Last Supper narratives in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the stories of the miraculous meal omit Jesus' words identifying himself with the bread and wine.

What does Luke want us to glean from this story? If we look at it simply with contemporary eyes, we can discover a challenging outline of the eucharistic liturgy. It begins with the Liturgy of the Word as Jesus healed people and spoke to the crowds about the kingdom of God. We might take the disciples' concern for the people's hunger as a detached prayer of the faithful; they see a need and hope/pray that it will be met. Then, Jesus instructs them to organize the crowd in community groups of about 50. When the communities are gathered, he took the food, gave thanks (blessed God for it), broke it, and gave it to the disciples. The care with which the evangelists chose their words to precisely echo the Last Supper words over the bread demonstrates the equivalency they saw between the miraculous meals and Jesus' final meal

with the disciples. Luke wants us to realize that this is an alternative account of the Eucharist.

At the Last Supper, the focus was on Jesus: his upcoming death for their sake, his going away, and his promise to remain with them. Here, the story focuses much more on the disciples and the crowds. In the context of Luke's Gospel, the event of the miraculous meal comes between the first time Jesus sent the disciples on mission and his first prediction of his passion. Luke built his story very carefully.

When the disciples returned from their mission, Jesus invited them to come away, but the crowds found them and Jesus wouldn't turn them away. Instead, he ministered to them in word and deed.

As Jesus went on speaking of the kingdom, the disciples assessed the situation and realized that people had material as well as spiritual needs. They also knew the limits of their own food supply. Therefore, they explained to Jesus that it was time to send the folks to fend for themselves. Jesus' response, as when the crowds first came, was that his disciples should care for the people's need. As sensible people, the disciples gave Jesus an exact accounting of what they had: five hunks of bread and two fish. (Minnows or whales? We know not how big.)

But Jesus' concern was elsewhere. His question was not how much they had, but how much they were willing to give. And so Jesus took all that they had, blessed and broke it and gave it back to the disciples to give away. We should be clear. Nowhere does the Gospel say that there was a multiplication of the loaves, only that there were plenty of leftovers.

At the Last Supper, Jesus called the bread and wine his body and blood, saying that he was giving everything he was to and for the disciples. At the miraculous meal, he led them to do the same. Eucharist is Communion with Jesus in his person and his mission. As Paul says, it is the call to proclaim who Jesus is by the way we live. No matter how little we have to give, when we give it all, it is enough.

Planning: Body and Blood of Christ

By: Lawrence Mick

Today, we celebrate the gift and the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. You will find the texts for this celebration right after the texts for Trinity Sunday (i.e., after the 34th Sunday in Ordinary Time) in both the Missal and the Lectionary. Make sure the lectors know where to find them and that both books are marked at the proper page before Mass.

There is a Sequence for today's liturgy, but it is an optional one. Only the Easter and Pentecost Sequences are obligatory. If you choose to use the Sequence, note that there are both long and short forms. The Sequence is meant to be sung, but it may be a challenge to find musical settings in this instance. Since it is optional, you could perhaps substitute another eucharistic hymn in its place, but logically, it should address similar themes as the Sequence itself.

Why do we have such a feast in our calendar? Without considering the history of the feast and the possible doctrinal purposes behind it, we might still ask what purpose it serves today. There is a danger that any ritual we celebrate weekly can become routine. Focusing on this sacrament might help us to remember its importance and renew our conscious appreciation of the great gift that it is. Of course, we also have a similar reminder on Holy Thursday.

Might we appreciate this feast from another perspective? As we noted last week, this celebration follows Easter with its initiation emphasis. When new members of the church first receive the Eucharist, it is generally recognized as a culminating moment of their initiation. Now, they are full members of the church community, sharing at the common table.

The emphasis today, then, might focus especially on the unifying nature of this sacred meal. Every meal tends to unite those who share it. We generally share meals with family or friends, but even sharing with strangers or enemies can break down walls and move us closer to unity. This is even more true in a ritual meal in a religious context. Jesus knew what he was doing when he chose a meal as the means of continuing to be with us bodily. He knew it would be the best way to keep us united to him and to one another.

When you choose hymns and write petitions today, keep a focus on unity. Pray for unity in the parish, in the larger church, and among all peoples around the world. Pray for the courage to sacrifice our personal desires for the good of the whole body of Christ. Presiders might choose the second preface for this feast of the Eucharist (which is the one printed with the other texts of the feast) because it highlights the unity focus.

Prayers: Body and Blood of Christ

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Bread and wine were an ancient component in Israel's ritual history. Jesus infused their sharing with new meaning that has sustained the church to this day. When we regularly participate in the Eucharist, we can become immune to its unifying power for the whole world. This annual feast reminds us that it is our central liturgical act as Christians. Unity is deeply needed more than ever, and the source of that unity is literally in our hands.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you blessed, broke and shared bread with the hungry crowd: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, your simple offering was abundant and sustained them: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you continue to sustain us in bread that is blessed, broken and shared: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for those suffering from deep spiritual and physical hunger.

Minister For the church and its members, may everything we say and do demonstrate to the world the healing, unifying power of the Eucharist, we pray:

- For a renewed sense of the unifying power of the Eucharist; and for the commitment to fully live its implications, we pray:
- For all among us who are unable to fully participate in the Eucharist for any reason; and that all who yearn to share in the Eucharist may freely do so, we pray:
- For an awareness that participating in the Eucharist calls us to share ourselves and our resources with all in need, and for knowing that small acts of generosity are multiplied for those who need them, we pray:
- For all the ministers who make our liturgical celebrations prayerful and meaningful, we pray:
- For all for whom summer is a burden, rather than a welcome respite; for youth without supervision or who cannot find work or recreation; and for parents who lack the means for child care or vacation, we pray:

Presider Nourishing God, we thank you for feeding us with the body and blood of your beloved Son. Help us remember that receiving this sacred food calls us to actively reach out in generous love to all who are hungry in any way. We pray, in Jesus' name, that the Eucharist may make us one. Amen.

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