

Known in the Breaking of Bread

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Exodus 24:1-11 NIV

Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the Lord ; the others must not come near. And the people may not come up with him.”

When Moses went and told the people all the Lord’s words and laws, they responded with one voice, “Everything the Lord has said we will do.” Moses then wrote down everything the Lord had said.

He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the Lord . Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.”

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank.

Luke 24:13-35 NIV

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

And he said to them, “What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?” And they stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, named Cleopas, answered him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

And he said to them, “What things?” And they said to him, “Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see.”

And he said to them, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.

So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight.

They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them, who said, “The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!”

Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.

As most of you know, I was first ordained in 1964 in the Methodist Church. After that I served as a student pastor of several churches in New England while completing my doctorate in biblical studies. Then I taught college in Texas for three years and had the opportunity to conduct worship once in a while,

and after that I was a Methodist pastor in western Illinois for three years. Then I spent two years on the staff of a Foursquare Gospel church in the Quad Cities. But in 1980 I lost my job and had to start all over again. I joined the C.C.C.C. at that time, but for one reason or another I wasn't able to get back into either full time pastoral ministry or college teaching. So I spent twenty years working for Rand McNally as a transportation data analyst, from which I retired three years ago. During that time I served an interim ministry in Glen Ellyn; then tried to start two churches on my own, but they never got off the ground. Eventually I started attending an Anglican church in Wheaton. Because my credentials were with the C.C.C.C. I had no ministerial standing in that church. So for all practical purposes I haven't been able to function regularly in the pastoral ministry since the 1970s, until now you good folks at Union Congregational have been kind enough to let me serve as your interim minister.

Why am I telling you all this? Only to tell you about what I've missed the most in not being a pastor for more than two decades. It wasn't the administration of a church. It wasn't working with groups or counseling people. It wasn't preaching and teaching. Those things can all be very satisfying, but what I missed the most was what I have the privilege of doing today, and that is to stand at the Lord's Table and lead the people of God in celebrating Holy Communion. That's what I've longed for all these years, and to me it's the most satisfying part of working with you during this time of transition in this church's life.

The Lord's Supper, you see, is the most basic act of Christian worship. In the New Testament we read about prayer, and prophecy, and psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, and other acts of worship. We hear those great anthems of the Revelation to John: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (Revelation 5:12). We catch the vision of the apostle Paul for universal worship, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:10-11). But none of these acts of worship are set forth in any great detail. It's the Supper of the Lord that gets the most attention from the New Testament writers, in both the Gospels and the Epistles of Paul.

From the very beginning, Christian worship has always combined two main elements: the Service of the Word, and the Service of the Lord's Table. In First Corinthians, Paul discusses both of these aspects of worship; he explains how we're to prophesy in the Christian assembly, and how we're to conduct ourselves at the Lord's Supper. Some scholars think these were simply two parts of the same Christian gathering on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week.

The proclamation of the Word of God and the sharing in the Table of the Lord have always gone together, and something is missing when one of them is left out. I like to call them the "twin peaks" of Christian worship. Notice that our Old Testament reading, from the Book of Exodus, has the same double emphasis. First, Moses declares to all the people the Lord's words that he received on the holy mountain. Then the elders of Israel go up the mountain with Moses and, we are told, "they saw God, and they ate and drank" (Exodus 24:11). The same two aspects to the Lord's Table are present in our Gospel reading from Luke 24. First, Jesus opens the Scriptures to his unwitting disciples, showing them how they teach that the Messiah must suffer and then be glorified. Then Jesus shares a meal with them, and as he breaks the bread they realize who he is. Word and Table — these are the "twin peaks" of Christian celebration. This morning we have gone up our first "peak" with the reading of the Gospel, the words of our Lord. And in a little while we'll go up again to the second of these "twin peaks" and, like the elders of Israel at Mount Sinai — like those disciples on the road to Emmaus — we will eat and drink in the Lord's presence.

It's because the sharing in Holy Communion is so central in our worship that I want to spend this time with you discussing some of its different aspects and meanings. I'd like to do this by asking several questions. First, why do we observe the Lord's Supper? Second, what are some different *names* given to this basic act of Christian worship, and what do these names have to teach us about what we're doing? And third, how is Jesus present with us when we meet him at the Lord's Table?

First, why do we have Holy Communion? In a faith based on spiritual realities, why are we dealing with something so *physical* as plates of diced bread or tinkling little cups of grape juice? Eating and drinking can seem so earthly, so crass and materialistic — and anyway it's kind of a bother to pass those vessels or, if we go to another kind of church, to get up and walk down the aisle to be served. Well, there's one good reason why we do this: because Jesus told us to. "*Do this* in remembrance of me." If we never go a step further — if we never comprehend what it means to observe the Lord's Supper, and if we never

understand exactly how he could be “known to us in the breaking of the bread” — we would still *do it* because Jesus told us to do it. In Acts 2:42, Luke gives us a picture of the life of the very first church in Jerusalem: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” We devote ourselves to *the breaking of bread* because our Lord would have it so. It’s that simple.

Second, what can we learn about what Holy Communion means from the different terms Christians have applied to this act of worship? I have already used several terms: *breaking bread*, *Holy Communion*, *Lord’s Supper*. There’s another historic term, *Eucharist*. Each of these has its origins in the Bible. Let’s look at them, one by one.

First, the *breaking of bread* was a meal shared by the whole church that included the blessing of the loaf and cup according to Jesus’ instructions. We’re not comfortable, are we, eating with strangers? Eating together, then as now, was a symbol of belonging together. As a persecuted minority, the early Christians found strength and hope in sharing at the table. Perhaps David’s words came to mind: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies” (Psalm 23:5). Breaking bread is a way of saying that we’re bonded one to another.

Paul criticized the Corinthian Christians because they ate their common meal selfishly, each one taking whatever he could for himself. This violated their bond in Jesus Christ. Paul warned them not to forget others when sharing in the common meal. He said, “Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without *discerning the body* eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Corinthians 11:28-29). Sometimes people take Paul’s words to mean that we need to examine our lives for hidden sins before receiving the Lord’s Supper. The sin Paul is talking about is not hidden: it’s the sin of ignoring the needs of our fellow Christians as we break bread with them. As you come to the table today, a good question to ask yourself is, “How can I *discern the body* of Christ? How can I minister to the needs of those in my church family?” That’s what it means to examine yourself at the Lord’s Table.

Second, Paul uses the term *Lord’s Supper* to describe the Lord’s Table (1 Corinthians 11:20). His point is that there is more to the ceremony than simply consuming food together. Through his death, Jesus has brought into being a new community loyal to him as Sovereign. Sharing the tokens of his body and blood is a way of setting forth this basic gospel message, to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26) — in fact, we could take this expression, in the Greek, to mean that in the Lord’s Supper we proclaim the Lord’s death *so that he might come*. The Supper is the Lord’s and he is present with us *now* as we share in the symbols of his life.

At the Last Supper, Jesus blessed the loaf and cup as a sign of the covenant between God and his new people. He called it “the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:29), just as Moses enacted God’s covenant with Israel by sprinkling the blood of sacrifice on the people. In the Bible a covenant is like a treaty between a King and his servants, and such agreements were sometimes sealed by sharing a meal — as we saw in our reading from Exodus (Exodus 24:11). Therefore, the Lord’s Supper is *our covenant meal* through which we acknowledge Jesus’ kingship and authority over our lives. The Greek words translated “Lord’s Supper” might also be translated “Royal Banquet.” Christ himself is our host at the Lord’s Table, receiving our renewed pledge of loyalty to him and his kingdom.

Paul offers another term when he speaks of the loaf and the cup as *koinonia*, in 1 Corinthians 10: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a *koinonia* in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a *koinonia* in the body of Christ?” This word has no exact English equivalent, but may be translated as *participation*, *sharing* or *communion*. The cup we bless is a sharing in Christ’s blood, and the bread we break is a participation in his body. The term “Holy Communion” originates in this expression, and refers to the inner unity of believers one with another through their union in Christ. The Lord’s Table symbolizes and even *brings about* that unity. As Paul says, “We, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:17).

One more term, and that is *Eucharist*, or Thanksgiving. On the night before his death, Jesus celebrated a Passover meal with his disciples. During that meal, he performed a simple and common Jewish ceremony, *giving thanks* over the loaf and the cup. It was this act of blessing — not the Passover that is

observed only once a year — that eventually became the Christian ceremony of the Lord's Table. That's how the term Eucharist, or thanksgiving, came to be applied to the Lord's Supper.

Giving thanks means more than simply expressing gratitude. In the Bible, especially the Psalms, to *give thanks* means to confess that the Lord is our King and God. That's why Paul finds the refusal to give thanks to be such a fundamental act of rebellion and sin against the Creator (Romans 1:21). When we gather at the Lord's Table we give thanks to God as a way of pledging our loyalty to him and our reliance on his covenant with us.

Now we must move on to our final question: Just how is Jesus present with us when we meet him at the Lord's Table? He did say, "This is my body . . . This is my blood." But how do we understand these words? Christians have tried to answer this question in a variety of ways. Catholics believe that through the prayers of a priest God changes the bread and wine into the very body and blood of Christ, even though they still look and taste like bread and wine. That's called *transubstantiation*. Lutherans believe that Christ is *present with* the elements but not identified with them. That's called *consubstantiation*. Reformed Protestants and most evangelicals believe that the bread and wine are symbols, or emblems, that help us to remember that Jesus gave his life for us, for Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

What do *you* believe, Dr. Leonard? Well, maverick that I am, I come at it from yet another angle. If the Lord's Supper is only a *memory aid*, why would Paul have been so concerned about receiving it unworthily? But if Jesus was still with his disciples in the flesh when he said, "This is my body . . . This is my blood" how could the bread and wine also be his body and blood? Besides, when Paul says the bread we break is a sharing in the body of Christ, it's clear from the context that the *body* he has in mind is the *body of believers* who are sharing, and not the loaf on the table.

And yet, Jesus did say "This is my body . . . This is my blood." There has to be a sense in which Jesus makes his presence known to us in just these particular things he gave his disciples: bread made from the harvest of the field, wine made from the fruit of the vine — those very down-to-earth gifts he gave his followers at a particular time and place in history. It would not do to try to have the Lord's Supper with coffee and doughnuts. Only the very things Jesus gave us can connect us with our Jesus who died once for all for our sins, and was raised again for our salvation. The symbols of his life, in other words, are more than symbols as we usually understand symbols. These symbols *partake of the reality* of that which they represent — or *re-present* — for us today. But how can they do this?

The telephone rings. I pick up the receiver. The voice I hear is that of a dear friend a thousand miles away. We have a wonderful visit, a tender conversation touching the deep things of life. We say our goodbyes and I put the receiver back in its cradle thankful that I've met with my friend and we've shared our lives with each other. I've heard the voice of someone important to me. *But wait a minute* — I didn't really hear his voice, after all! It was only the vibration of a diaphragm in the telephone, activated by analog or digital signals through a set of wires or relays or microwave towers. I was fooled — it wasn't my friend I heard, after all, just a lifeless machine! How stupid of me, to think that I actually had a conversation with my friend when it was only a vibrating metal disk!

Do you see my point? The phone call didn't *remind* me of my friend, it actually let me converse with him. Yet the telephone receiver wasn't my friend's actual voice, only a transform of it. Still, through this medium my friend and I were present to each other, and involved in each other's lives.

How is Christ present in the Lord's Supper? How does he make himself known to us in the breaking of bread? We can't capture this in some arcane theological formula or analyze it with some dry rationalistic explanation. But when we give thanks over the loaf and the cup, and share in these symbols Jesus gave us, we know that we've heard his voice and met with him in a way unlike any other. We know that our Friend is present, ready to save and comfort and heal and encourage. Like the elders on Mount Sinai, we eat and drink and so behold the Lord. Like the disciples at Emmaus, our eyes are opened and we come to know Jesus "in the breaking of the bread."

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