**Introduction:**

We all recognize the communion table as a central feature in the sanctuaries in many churches. Would it surprise you to know that it wasn’t always so - it’s really only been in the last hundred years that such tables became central to sanctuaries. Before that time, they mostly were pushed to the back of the worship space, usually attached to the wall more like a shelf or counter. Up until the mid-1960s, Roman Catholic priests stood with their backs to the congregation reciting the Eucharistic Mass in Latin! The word Eucharist comes from the Greek meaning “giving thanks”.

Today, communion tables are free standing, visible and most importantly mostly accessible. Typically, they aren’t considered an altar, but are designed to be actually used. Within the church are a symbol of hospitality, and like any good kitchen table, are meant to be gathered around. This ties it back to the fact that when communion was first celebrated by early Christians it would have been while gathered around a table in a home.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus gathered at tables in various people’s homes to eat and drink with friends, outcasts, and sinners. In his teachings, he used the table as an image of inclusivity, generosity and the in-breaking of God’s realm.

At the final meal he shared with his closest followers, Jesus initiated the mystery of what we have come to consider a sacrament – a visible sign of God’s invisible grace. This sacrament, known by many names: Eucharist, Communion, The Lord’s Supper…is a Christian adaptation of Jewish traditions around mealtime worship and the Passover Supper.

Empowered by their experience of the Risen Jesus, the early church met weekly to hear the Word and to break bread. Today, we, the church of 2023, continue to remember the history and hopes of the people of God, and the Holy One’s care and concern for creation through our participation in communion.

Communion is celebration and memorial. The brokenness of our world lifted up by broken bread. The thirst of the world remembered in a cup of juice. Whether we do this weekly, monthly or seasonally, we celebrate this sacrament regularly in order to remember our identity as a covenant people of God.

Today, our entire worship will be based on the typical communion liturgy as we explore more about this feast at the heart of our faith.

And so, let us begin by lighting our candles to remind us of Christ’s presence not only where two or three are gathered, but also around the table. We light the peace candle as we pray that the world would experience the peace of Christ, and we light the diversity candle to honour our commitment to be a community of radical love and welcome to all God’s people.

**A Brief History of Communion:**

Globally, in a variety of styles, different settings and elements, and in diverse languages, the Eucharist is celebrated, daily. Communion is likely the most distinctive element of Christian Worship – which is a bit ironic considering the sacrament, is rooted in Jewish tradition.

Typically, Jewish worship takes place both in the temple or synagogue, and in the home. Every meal considered a holy event marked by faithful Jews with special food, special words and special actions. For instance, the Passover Seder, a particularly sacred meal. While it isn’t clear from the different Gospel accounts of the Last Supper, but it is believed that it was the Passover Seder that Jesus was sharing with his disciples on the night of his arrest. The Passover Seder meal recounts the story of the Israelites liberation from slavery in Egypt. It includes symbolic foods like bitter herbs, representing their suffering. There are rituals of candle lighting, bread breaking and cup sharing. These are accompanied by prayers of thanksgiving, stories recalling the events of the Exodus, and expressions of hope and anticipation for a future in which God will continue to deliver them.

If these elements sound vaguely familiar, it is likely because they have been incorporated into our own Christian communion liturgies: eating, drinking, remembering the story, and expressions of gratitude for what God has done and hopeful for what God will continue to do. Along with symbols and words, Christians emulate the physical actions of Jesus as recorded in the scripture – and so the verbs TAKING, THANKING, BREAKING and GIVING are important aspects of our liturgy. Through repeating the physical actions of Jesus, we find a way of mystically experiencing a sense of Jesus’ presence.

Unfortunately, there are not a lot of written accounts describing how early Christians celebrated communion. There are few scriptural references, in particular following Pentecost the Book of Acts tells of believers coming together in their homes to eat their meals “*with glad and humble hearts, praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all people.” (Acts 2: 46-47)*

From what we can discern, these early believers shared a full meal together and then sent the leftovers to the poor of the community. We aren’t sure when the communion meal downsized to bread and wine, or when it moved from the home to the sanctuary but through the centuries the liturgy and practices have continued to evolve while retaining some common characteristics.

In the Middle Ages, when death was a common presence, the language of the Eucharist prayers became elaborate, incorporating lengthy intercessions for the living and the dead. Soon prayers of apology added accompanied by statements of our unworthiness. Somewhere along the line, the “kiss of peace” was added as an essential communion piece. Aren’t you thankful we moved on to passing the peace with handshakes.

Incense was used to purify the communion table, while priests ritually washed their hands before handling the elements (precursor to holy hand sanitizer?). At some point in the Medieval period, priests began to tear off a piece of bread to place in the wine -symbolizing the unity between – wait for it – the pope and the diocese. Over time, it became common for the congregation to only receive bread, with the cup being kept for the priest. Every crumb and drop of wine was carefully gathered so that Christ’s body wasn’t wasted. Even today, Catholic priests must drink whatever is left in the communion chalice. Historical Anglican churches have special funnels to pour blessed wine into so that it can be syphoned outside rather than it going down the drain. Today, we deal with left over elements in different ways: feeding the birds as a way of sharing it with creation. Leaving it out for sharing at coffee time to continue the feast. Taking it home for holy bread pudding.

During the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther made more changes to the communion liturgy. He added music, which opened up a space for hymn writers like the Wesley Brothers. He added symbolic actions, like raising the bread and wine so that the people could see it. But, with the Reformations emphasis on “The Word” the Eucharist took a backseat to the scriptures and lessened in frequency. When it was celebrated, attempts were made to standardize the prayers and actions so that there was uniformity wherever communion was shared.

By contrast, in modern times, communion liturgies and practices vary from denomination to denomination, from congregation to congregation, and even minister to minister. There is both a creativity and flexibility now in the liturgy, and the United Church additionally emphasizes the inclusive nature of the table, welcoming all to the table.

**Understanding Communion**

Just as there is no single interpretation of our scripture stories, there is no single understanding of communion. Just as there is no one-size fits all instruction manual for celebrating it, and there isn’t a one-size understanding shared by Christians. John White, author of the essential “Introduction to Christian Worship” says “to reduce (the Eucharist) to one experience for all Christians, denies its power.”

In fact, White points out that there are at least 6 different metaphors for the Eucharist in the New Testament.

1. As thanksgiving – an act of gratefulness and praise through the joyful sharing of a meal like the first Disciples did in Acts.

2. As fellowship – the image of gathered wheat reminds us that we are brought together and grounded in God’s good earth. The image of the crushed grape reminds us that we are connected in the suffering of creation. The wheat and grape are further reflected in the act of eating as community as One Body which Paul suggests in his letter to the Corinthians.

3. As commemoration – taking a lead from its Jewish roots, communion is an opportunity to remember the good works of God from Creation to incarnation in Jesus.

4. As sacrifice – remembering the new covenant that Jesus brought into being.

5. As mystery – with the symbolic and inexplicable yet very real essence of Christ being present in the sacred actions and elements.

6. As the work of the Holy Spirit – the metaphorical meal strengthens and nurtures those who share in it.

Yet, the Church has continually disagreed about the “real” meaning of Communion. From bread vs wafer, to children vs no children, the church has butted heads on various elements of the celebration.

Since about the 11th century, the rite of Holy Communion has been more about intellectual speculation than being a devout experience. Arguments arose over whether the bread and wine were literally the body and blood of Christ or symbols of it. Debate over Eucharist as representation of sacrifice rather than sacrament, and how Christ was or was not present in it took place for years. Further division happened over a single word with much meaning: Transubstantiation…the Roman Catholic doctrine that says that at a specific point in the rite the bread and the wine is actually replaced by the substance of the body and blood of Christ, while the “accidents” of bread and wine, remain.

More disagreement that is modern happens over who can and cannot take communion, who can and cannot celebrate communion. Should it only be ordained ministers? Why do diaconal and lay worship leaders need special permission? Why should churches without a minister not be allowed to have communion? Do we serve communion in the pews or have people come forward? Grape juice or wine? Bread or all gluten free options? Can we use others things for the elements? Does communion over zoom count?

Our understanding and practices continue to evolve, and while each of us has our personal preferences, there is no one right way. Maybe instead of overthinking communion, it would be better for us to keep the words of Reformer John Calvin in our minds. He said, “Feeding on Christ is a mystery, which plainly, neither the mind is able to conceive or the tongue express.”

Is it time to agree to disagree with the intention of embracing the mystery and meaning of Communion instead of fussing over elements and words? It might just be.

**Communion**

Communion liturgies often start with what is called “The Great Thanksgiving” or a call to give thanks and praise to God. One of the ways we do this is through our offering – gifts of time, talent and treasure shared in gratitude for all that we have in life. So with this in mind, let us sing our blessing:

**Offertory:** MV182 Grateful (refrain only)

*Grateful, for the life you give us,*

*Thankful, for your Holy Son,*

*Joyful, in your Spirit flowing –*

*Over all, O God of Love.*

*Grateful, for the Bread of Heaven.*

*Thankful, for your Holy Word,*

*Joyful, in your mercy flowing.*

*We will praise you!*

***Prayer of Thanksgiving***

Indeed God we will praise you!

Joining with siblings in faith through the centuries,

We ask your blessing on the gifts that we share

As we continue to give thanks for the gracious gifts

You share with us.

From the creation of the cosmos and this planet we call home –

To the seeds of faith planted in the prophets, saints and martyrs

Throughout the ages;

We give thanks for the blessing and promise

Of the earth and all her resources;

And this bread, once scattered as grain,

Now brought together from across all lands

To work in harmony and unison to bring about

You reign of justice and peace.

We join with those of every and place

In giving you praise and glory!

The liturgy continues with the Song of Creation,

Otherwise known as the:

***Sanctus and Benedictus – MV203 Holy, Holy, Holy***

We move from the Song of Creation To

***Remembering Jesus at the Table***

Where the presider usually tells the story of Jesus’ life, birth and ministry, giving thanks for his teaching, his healing and his gifts of love and life. We hear about Jesus’ death and resurrection, with the promise of his return. Today, we will let the Scripture tell the story, followed by a short silence to reflect on what Jesus means to us individually.

***Prayer of Self Giving***

Here, in faithful remembrance of the many ways Jesus gave of himself, we offer ourselves and our lives in faithful imitation of Jesus’ self-giving.

Giving ourselves and our lives to one another in love is addressed in this light hearted reflection by Pastor Vince Amlin of the United Church of Christ. It’s called Flesh and Blood.

Amlin writes:

My three year old daughter is fascinated by the macabre. She came home from a visit with my parents invoking the name of Dracula, and begging us to recite in our best Transylvanian, “I vant to suck your blood!” Thanks, Grandma.

This week she was hooked on a comic that features a sneering skeleton surrounded by flames. We decided to put that one away. It seemed a little too scary. A little too grim.

Then, we let her take communion every week.

John 6: 51, 54-55

I am the living bread that came down from heaven… and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh…Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

Is it little wonder that the early church was accused of cannibalism? This is gruesome stuff. Even as one who is old enough to read it, I’m not sure what to make of it.

I’m tempted to spiritualize, to say Jesus sustains us the way that other bread from heaven sustained God’s people.

But it’s more than that. More solid. More sordid. Less vegetarian.

It’s incarnation at its roots: “in flesh”. Jesus gives his body for the life of the world. His beefy heart. The marrow of his bones. His lifeblood.

And we, the body of Christ, receive our own call bite by bite. To rise to new life and be consumed. TO give our lives, our bodies to one another in the name of love.

Flesh and blood. Grim. Scary. A gift from heaven worth getting hooked on.

Together we sing of shared memory, and shared hope in our

***Memorial Acclamation: MV#204***

***The Prayer of Transformation:*** is when we call upon the Holy Spirit to be present at the table – bringing all of us into Christ’s presence and making us one in the Risen Christ with all the faithful of the world.

Spirit, join us in this feast of bread and juice. A simple meal for the faithful of God. May we be nourished by it so that we can embody the ministry, work and love of Christ. Filled body and spirit by this meal may we share of our gifts – remembering we are the hands and feet of Christ here and in the world. Amen.

The prayer concludes with

***Remembering the Community & The Lord’s Prayer***

A version of the prayers of the people where we hold up the concerns we carry with us for the world, for our circles of support and for ourselves. We are going to take a few moments of silence to do that now, and we will end the prayer by speaking together the Lord’s Prayer, using the language that comes most naturally to you.

We end this portion of the liturgy by joyfully singing:

***The Great Amen – MV205***

We come to the point in the service where we finally do what it is that we’ve been leading up to – we participate in the meal that reminds us of that last one Jesus shared with his friends. Remember the verbs we mentioned earlier: Taking-Thanking-Breaking and giving.

And so, we do as Jesus did, drawing on his deep Jewish roots and in the practice of his Hebrew tradition: he Took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread and gave it to his friends, saying: Take. Eat. Each time you break bread together, remember me.

In the same way, he took the cup, gave thanks, poured it into a cup, and gave it to his friends, saying, “When you share the cup together, remember me”.

With these uncomplicated actions, we too are invited to share in this feast.

Come for the table is ready.