



“Better Together – Bread + Wine”

Exodus 12:1-13; Luke 22:7-23; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Holy Communion – the meal shared by believers for nearly two millennia. Come to the Lord’s Table.

Last week, we brought together Love + Law. This week we turn to Bread + Wine (or Bread + Cup), which is, of course, the story and the practice of Holy Communion. The story begins with Passover and the flight from Egypt, centered upon “covenant.”

Covenant

The word translated “covenant” is *bērît* in the Hebrew, occurring 286 times in the Old Testament. A “covenant” is akin to a contract or an agreement between two parties. God’s people have always lived in a covenant relationship with our Maker. Sometimes these biblical covenants are really pledges that God makes, such as the pledge to Noah never to flood the earth again. God’s covenant with Abraham is also a promise by God to give Abraham a land, countless descendants, and that all the earth would be blessed through him. God asks very little of Abraham. There is no Law, no Ten Commandments, no tabernacle. But, all that changes with the Exodus and the giving of the Law.

A covenant in the Bible isn’t quite the same as a contract. Elmer Martens offers a good suggestion: think of a contract as “thing-oriented” but a covenant as “people-oriented.” And the *bērît* that matters most is the covenant between God and his people made at Mt. Sinai after the Exodus from Egypt. There, at the foot of the mountain, God made a covenant with his chosen people after saving them from slavery in Egypt. God taught them how they were to live with God and with one another. The Ten Commandments, written on stone tablets, lay at the heart of God’s instruction for his people. Though the Israelites cherished God’s law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unwilling to live as God had taught them; unable to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

The consequences of the people’s endless abandonment of God and God’s ways culminate in the death of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Nonetheless, God, through his prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his law, his instruction to them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God’s people would no longer even have to teach each other about God, for they would all know God. God would forgive their faithlessness and not even remember their sin. This would be God’s new covenant with his people.

The Last Supper and the New Covenant

Symbols can be emotionally powerful, sometimes enormously so. In his ministry, Jesus’ actions were often powerfully symbolic. He ate with the oppressed and despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in the coming of God’s kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God’s kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. When Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover Festival in the days before his death, he went to the temple overturning tables and invoking, in words and action, Jeremiah’s judgment on the temple system. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Because of the large crowds in Jerusalem for festival, Jesus and his disciple had stayed in Bethany, a “suburb.” Now, after sundown on Thursday, the evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. Here, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the “bread of affliction,”¹ (Deut 16:3). Now, Jesus identifies the bread with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb was seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. But now, Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is the “mediator of a better covenant, enacted through better promises” (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus’ own blood. Is it any wonder that early

¹ God instructed the Israelites to use unleavened bread at Passover to remind them of their hasty departure from Egypt. Unleavened bread is bread made without yeast. It takes time for yeast to do its magic, making the bread rise.

Christians came to embrace the sacredness of the Lord's Supper? (See 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 for the tradition about the Lord's Supper passed on to Paul. Paul's letter was written before any of the Gospels.)

TRANSUBSTANTIATION

There's a mouthful. Many protestants think Roman Catholics believe that at Communion, the bread and wine (or grape juice) are magically changed into the body and blood of Christ. This seems like nonsense since the bread and wine still look and taste like bread and wine. Perhaps this will help.

This Roman Catholic doctrine is grounded in Aristotle's understanding of reality, as worked out by Thomas Aquinas and others.

Aristotle held that every object consists of accidents and substance. The object's accidents are all of its properties, everything that can be perceived by our senses. Its substance is its essence. For example, the accidents of this piece of paper you are holding are its color, size, texture, shape, smell and so on – everything that makes it paper so far as you can tell. But for Aristotle, its essence, its underlying “paper-ness” is something different; it is its *substance*. In other words, the piece of paper's substance is separate from the paper's properties.

Aquinas and others applied Aristotle's view of reality to the bread and wine of communion. The doctrine of transubstantiation (“conversion in substance”) holds that when the bread and wine are blessed, their accidents remain as they were. They still look and taste like bread and wine. But . . . the substance of the bread and wine is converted from “bread-ness” and “wine-ness” to “Christ-ness.” They may taste like bread and wine, but the underlying reality is that they have become the body and blood of Christ. Thus, Roman Catholics claim the actual physical presence of Christ at Communion.

The Lord's Supper

In the first decades of Christianity, when the followers of Jesus gathered they shared a meal. For some, it was probably the best meal they got all week. It is clear from Paul's scolding of the Corinthian Christians that they often forgot why they shared this meal that Jesus had given them. Some ate like gluttons. Some even got drunk. And, worst of all, some were excluded from the meal. I haven't seen anyone ever stagger away from our Holy Communion at First UMC (mostly because we use grape juice instead of wine), but I wonder how much thought we give to what is really happening when we eat the bread and drink from the cup.

Christians are all over the place when it comes to Holy Communion. We all (or at least, most) affirm that it is breathtakingly significant, But ask “What is really happening?” and you'll get a lot of answers. Scripture doesn't help much here. What exactly did Jesus mean when he said, “This is my body . . . this is my blood” or “Do this in remembrance of me”? The disciples were perplexed and so are we.

In keeping with John Wesley, Methodists are theologians of the middle. We are a bridging church. This reflects our roots in the Church of England, which, during the Protestant reformation, sought to hold together those who wanted to stay with Rome and those who sought a return to “primitive” Christianity (the Puritans, for example). We see this Methodist (and Anglican) commitment to finding the middle way, the *via media*, in many areas of Christian doctrine and practice, including our understanding of Holy Communion.² Since we are searching for the middle way, let's look at the two extremes.

Reality or recollection?

In the text box, I've tried to summarize the Roman Catholic view of Communion, namely, that by consecrating the elements (the bread and wine), they become the body and blood of Christ. For a Catholic, when Jesus said, “This is my body,” he meant just that. But many Protestant reformers challenged that understanding. One, Huldrych Zwingli, held that the Lord's Supper is merely a symbolic meal, a recalling or memorial of the Last Supper. Remembrance, then, becomes no more than recollection. Many Baptist and similar denominations hold this Zwinglian view.

You can see how these differing views would lead to very different practices. Daily Mass by Roman Catholics is understandable since they believe the Mass makes Christ physically present. Likewise, if Communion is no more than a symbolic recalling, then one might practice Communion infrequently. And, indeed, there are many Baptists that share the Lord's Supper only quarterly.

The Real Presence of Christ

In our striving to find the middle way, United Methodists embrace the claim that Jesus Christ is really present at Communion, in a way

² This is way too big a topic for this frustratingly short study. For more, you might read “This Holy Mystery: A UMC Understanding of Holy Communion,” which was adopted by the General Conference in 2004.

that he is not otherwise, but we do not try to explain exactly how we experience Christ's presence. We hold that "in remembrance" is far more than a symbolic recalling of Jesus' death; it is the dynamic re-presentation of the living Christ. This is from "This Holy Mystery."

United Methodists, along with other Christian traditions, have tried to provide clear and faithful interpretations of Christ's presence in the Holy Meal. Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. For United Methodists, the Lord's Supper is anchored in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but is not primarily a remembrance or memorial. We do not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works. We understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms. In the Holy Meal of the church, the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God's saving gift for the whole world. [Underlining added]

Past, present, and future

When we come to the Lord's table, we are stepping out of our own time and into God's time. The past and the future come rushing to meet us. Think of it as living on heaven's clock. The Jews grasped this. Each year at Passover, the father would gather the family together over the Passover meal, saying "This is the night when our God, the Holy One, blessed be he, came down to Egypt and rescued us from the Egyptians . . ." Of course, it wasn't the night – at least not as we reckon time. But it was the night in God's time. The family was one with their ancestors during that meal. They were the same family being rescued in an eternal act of salvation.

In the same way, when we come forward to partake of Holy Communion, we are with Christ, with the disciples, and with all the people of God. God's future, his victory over sin and death, comes rushing to meet us over the Lord's table.