

This Holy Mystery
Matthew 26:17-19, 26-29; Acts 2:43-47

Recently Nancy Flood and I hosted a catechism class of fifth graders from St. Perpetua Catholic Church. The teacher wanted them to visit other Christian churches to compare with their own church. Nancy shared with them the story behind this historical building and some of its unique features, such as this pulpit from Belgium. I helped the students discover how we are related as different branches of the same Christian family tree. We talked about some of the ways in which our churches are similar and different.

The students seemed surprised and delighted when I asked them to turn to page 9 in our hymnals and began reading the prayer called, The Great Thanksgiving, which is our communion prayer. I began, “The Lord be with you.” They knew to say, “And also with you.” “Lift up your hearts.” “We lift them up to the Lord.” “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.” “It is right to give our thanks and praise.” They recognized the prayer. It is the same one that they pray in their service of Holy Communion, called the Mass. We celebrated the fact that although we are different churches, we have one God, whom we worship in similar ways.

In fact, it was the reforms of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church that helped prompt liturgical renewal in Protestant churches, including The United Methodist Church. Many of us remember the nature of Holy Communion in the 1960’s as a somber time when we were made to feel sorry for our sin. The emphasis was on the suffering of Christ and our woeful behavior that made us unworthy to sit at the Lord’s Table. The prayer we prayed even had us say, ‘We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table.’ A word of forgiveness was spoken and we were invited to receive a small cube of bread and a little cup of juice, as long as we promised to do better and try to straighten ourselves out. As a child I remember the music reminding me of a funeral, solemn melodies in a minor key that made me feel far from joyful.

Around that time our denomination went back in time to the history of the early church. They discovered the Prayer of Thanksgiving that we will pray today and learned that the early church of the fourth century prayed this prayer. Holy Communion for them was not a time of groveling in sin at the foot of the table begging for a crumb. Feasting at the Lord’s Table was a time of joyful celebration and thankful remembrance of God’s work in the world, especially in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. We reclaimed the wisdom of our ancestors in the faith and Holy

Communion once again became an occasion of celebrating God's love revealed in Jesus Christ.

Holy Communion is an act of rich meaning and yet of great mystery. It is called a sacrament, which I think of as sacred moments in which our spirits are touched by the Spirit of God. They are moments in which the presence of Christ is made real to us, moments during which God reaches out to touch us. Sacraments are the outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace. The bread and cup are symbols of God's love. The bread symbolizes the body and life of Jesus. The cup of wine or juice is symbolic of Jesus' blood, not just the blood of his body, but the blood, the life-stream, of his heart and spirit. When Jesus invites us to share in the cup representing his blood, it is an invitation to share in his life, his heart, his spirit.

The New Testament offers us at least six major ideas about Holy Communion, which help us better comprehend the meaning of the sacrament.

Holy Communion is also known by the name **Eucharist**. It comes from a Latin word meaning "to give thanks." The early Christians "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:46-47a NIV). The Great Thanksgiving recites the saving work of God throughout history – creation, covenant, redemption, sanctification - culminating in the work of Jesus Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. It expresses our gratitude for God and the goodness of God and God's unconditional love for us.¹ That's why we can sing, "I come with joy to meet my Lord, forgiven, loved and free, in awe and wonder to recall his life laid down for me."²

Holy Communion is the **communion** of the church, the gathered community of the faithful, both local and universal. Paul wrote, "because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (I Corinthians 10:17). "The sharing and bonding experienced at the Table exemplify the nature of the church and model the world as God would have it be."³

Bishop William Willimon thinks of the Lord's Supper as the normal Sunday dinner of the family of God. At the Lord's Table girls and boys, youth and young adults, women and men, singles and couples, parents and grandparents kneel beside one another to break the bread and drink the cup. At Jesus' table there is no distinction made between age or sex or race or political loyalty or occupation or education or favorite football team. All are welcome. The Lord's Supper is not only table fellowship with Jesus, but

with the whole community of the faithful, the Body of Christ, the family of God.

Holy Communion is also **remembrance**, but more than an intellectual recalling. In feasting at the Lord's Table in remembrance of Jesus, the gracious acts of God in the past are re-presented in such a way that they become powerfully present now. "Christ is risen and alive here and now, not just remembered for what was done in the past."⁴

Holy Communion is a type of **sacrifice**. It is a re-presentation, not a repetition, of the sacrifice of Christ. The gift of Christ's life, death, and resurrection make God's grace available to us now. Christ's great gift inspires us to offer ourselves as a holy and living sacrifice, to be used by God in the work of reconciliation and justice (Romans 12:1).

Holy Communion is a vehicle of God's grace through the **action of the Holy Spirit**. This is where some of the mystery comes in. It is a gift of God to us, even when we don't fully understand it, even when we feel undeserving. Sometimes people have hesitated to partake of Holy Communion because of a sense that they are unworthy. The invitation is that "Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another." The invitation is open to all. When we come to the Table, we never know how the Holy Spirit might move within us. The most important thing we can do is make ourselves available for the Spirit to move among us.

Finally, "Holy Communion is **eschatological**, meaning that it has to do with the end of history, the outcome of God's purpose for the world.... We commune not only with the faithful who are physically present, but with the saints of the past who join us in the sacrament. To participate is to receive a foretaste of the future, a pledge of heaven 'until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.'"⁵

My family has been thinking about heaven more frequently. It has been comforting to hold that image of the heavenly banquet in which we will all be reunited with family and friends, when all God's people will feast together at the Lord's Table celebrating God's victory over sin, evil and death. In the midst of the personal and systemic brokenness in which we live, we yearn for everlasting fellowship with Christ and ultimate fulfillment of the divine plan.

Thanksgiving, communion, remembering, sacrifice, the action of the Holy Spirit, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet with the communion of saints – these are some of the meanings the scriptures offer for this holy meal. And yet, there is more to this sacred supper, more than we can

comprehend, more that can only be experienced, a mystery simply to behold and to receive with joy, awe, and thanksgiving.

A few years ago a nationwide poll asked, “What word or phrase would you most like to hear uttered to you, sincerely?”

Can you guess the first thing people wanted to hear? “I love you.” The second was, “You are forgiven.” Number three, surprisingly enough, was, “Supper is ready.”⁶

In a nutshell, that’s what God says to us in Holy Communion: “I love you. You are forgiven. Supper is ready.” Shrouded in mystery, that’s the essence of this holy meal: “I love you. You are forgiven. Come, feast, and be satisfied.”

¹ *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion* (Nashville, TN: The General Board of Discipleship of the United Methodist Church, 2003, 2004), p. 12.

² Brian Wren, "I Come with Joy," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. 617.

³ *This Holy Mystery*, p. 12.

⁴ *This Holy Mystery*, p. 12.

⁵ *This Holy Mystery*, p. 13.

⁶ James Harnish, "Walking with Jesus: Forgiveness," Tampa, Florida, March 22, 1998.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
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