

“World Communion: Eat this Bread, Drink this Cup” The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey
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TEXT: Matthew 26:26-30 While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.’ When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

EATING AND DRINKING TOGETHER had always been part of the ministry of Jesus. Indeed, bread had always been the center of Israel’s worship, the meeting of the spiritual with the physical, the holy with the profane. From the first flake of manna in the wilderness to the sanctity of the row of loaves, the Bread of the Presence, in the Holy of Holies of the Temple, God met God’s people in bread.

To this day, all around the world, people place a symbolic significance on the act of eating together. A shared meal is considered a sign of friendship. Shared bread has a way of breaking down barriers and bringing people together. Certainly that is an important part of what today is about. Around the world Christians are celebrating. Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, divided by decades of hatred, will both be at the Communion Table today. Christian Iranians and Christian Palestinians and Christian Iraqis and Christians in Israel are taking communion at the same time. People of different races -- black, white, red, yellow, brown -- so often suspicious of each other, today will be sharing bread and wine. The wealthy CEO, retired and living in a mansion overlooking the bay, and the welfare mother living in subsidized housing who would ordinarily never have occasion to eat together, will equally be guests at the Lord's Table. For this one moment at least, denominations and political affiliations don't matter. For this one moment we are no longer divided by age, sex, race, social status, or sexual orientation. For this one moment, longstanding arguments might be forgotten and longstanding grudges forgiven, for we are all the guests of Jesus at his Supper.

This meal with Jesus is all this, but it is more. Somehow what happens at this Table, communion, is more than simple community. It is something we do “in memory of him.” It’s not cannibalism, it’s not magic, it’s not mere symbolism. Somehow at this table, Jesus makes himself the bread of life, and gives us life in a way that requires us to chew and swallow and drink and gulp and become part of who and what he was and is.

I think it has something to do with meeting God. And in that meeting, I think it has something to do with becoming fully human.

In Luke’s gospel there comes a point when Jesus turns around and says to the large crowd of those trailing after him, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes and even life itself, cannot be my disciples.”

(Luke 14:26) Episcopal Priest Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that this was his way of telling them to go home. He did not need people to go to Jerusalem to die with him, he needed people to go back where they came from and live the kinds of lives that he had risked his own life to show them, lives of resisting the powers of death, of standing up for the little and the least, of turning cheeks and washing feet, of praying for enemies and loving the unlovable. That would be plenty hard enough for most of them.

If he could not shake the crowds off they were all going to get themselves killed. Or worse, they were going to venerate his path in place of finding their own. They were going to expect him to tell them things they could only discover for themselves. So he turned around and said something guaranteed to discourage most of them from going on any further. He stopped the car so the spiritual hitchhikers could get out. Drifting away in clumps of twos and threes they eventually found their ways back home where they started local chapters of the Friends of the Disciples and to everyone's great surprise that was enough. All these years later, there are still those who believe that becoming fully human is the highest honor they can pay to the Incarnate One who showed them how.

With the gift of bread, God invites us to be fully human, entering into the visceral realities of life, digging into the sensual and tangible.

And just as a good dinner is not really over when we push our chairs back from the table, the work of nourishment begins only after we have eaten. The result of digesting food is growth and energy and movement. The Word of God, whether received through a verse of scripture or a feast of bread and wine, is not to be reduced to spiritual abstractions. It is a call to live as Jesus lived.

Do any of you remember the film *Babette's Feast*? Two unmarried Scandinavian sisters, raised in strict religion to deny all earthly pleasures, give shelter to a French Roman Catholic refugee. They are recipients of startling grace when she spreads a bounty before them and their Protestant Pietist circle. It is a story of how food really is a sacrament, how the goodness of the table breaks down and heals up.

After the meal, none of the guests had any clear remembrance., writes author Isak Dinesen. They only knew that the rooms had been filled with a heavenly light as if a number of small halos had blended into one glorious radiance. The two old women who had once slandered each other in their hearts, went back a long way, past the evil period in which they had been stuck, to those days of their early childhood when together they had been preparing for confirmation and hand in hand had filled the roads with singing.

A brother gave another a knock in the ribs, like a rough caress between boys, and cried out: "You cheated me on that timber, you old scoundrel!" The brother thus addressed almost collapsed in a heavily burst of laughter but tears ran from his eyes. "Yes I did beloved brother, I did so." Skipper Halversen and Madam Oppegarden suddenly found themselves close together in a corner and gave one another that long, long kiss, for which the secret uncertain love affair of their youth had never allowed them.

And the author said, it never occurred to any of them that they might have been exalted by their own merit, human beings graced by God into becoming fully human. Committing one's self to the task of becoming fully human is not the same as the job of being human, which came with our birth certificate. To become fully human is something extra, a conscious choice that not everyone makes. Based on my limited wisdom, and experience, there is more than one way to do this. If I were a Buddhist, I might do it by taking the bodhisattva vow. If I were a Jew I might do it by following torah. Because I am a Christian I do it by imitating Christ, although I will be the first to admit that I want to stop about a day short of following him all the way.

We cannot proclaim the priesthood of all believers while we live a hierarchical life with judgments and impatience and elitist behaviors. We cannot follow the One who challenged the religious and political institutions of his time while we fund and defend our own. We cannot speak and sing of divine transformation while we do everything in our power to maintain our equilibrium. We cannot come to a table together, celebrating with Christians around the world, and keep hating and judging and condemning those who walk with us. And we cannot feast here without reaching out to feed others. We are not to be an end to ourselves, we are to be useful, which, when we come down to it, means that we are to be used. Used by the one who had fed us of himself, to perform deeds in his name. This is what the bread of Jesus means.

Who knows how we will meet God in all this -- in this ritual that is planned but allows for the unplanned, this meeting of the human spirit with the Holy Spirit of God?

St. Augustine of Hippo said, "You are the body of Christ. In you and through you the work of the incarnation must go forward. You are to be taken; you are to be blessed, broken, and distributed; that you may be the means of grace and the vehicles of the eternal charity."

The disciples did not understand the mystery of the table anymore than we do. But certainly they understood the power of the table. And the power is best felt without much thinking – a sort of holy ignorance more than religious certainty. We can bring to His Supper every burden but the burden of intellect. It is not that we leave our minds behind. (we bring less than ourselves if we do that) but we must bring them humbled, empty of pride, full of trust and wonder ready to receive.

In the sacrament presented to the gathered ones, God invites us to be people of God together; joined in a unique openness to take the bread of health and life, and drink the cup of mercy and joy, and be grateful; ready to be of the mind of Jesus Christ; ready to live as he taught us to live. May it be so.

