

“Interpreting Communion”

Mark 14.22–25

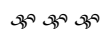
The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 2 October 2005

How can one sacrament have so many different names: Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper? Episcopalians tend to call it the Eucharist (the Great Thanksgiving); Roman Catholics call it either the Eucharist or Holy Communion (union with God); a lot of Protestants call it the Lord’s Supper (commemorating Jesus’ eating with sinners, tax collectors, etc., as well as the Last Supper). Why can’t we just agree on this sacrament that we Christians celebrate? We do basically the same thing: *take* bread and wine, *bless* it, *break* or pour it, and *distribute* it.

Christians around the world celebrate communion; the only exceptions I can think of are the Society of Friends and the Salvation Army. The Lord’s Supper is one of the things that ties us together as the body of Christ in the world today. World Communion Sunday began in 1936 as a celebration of Presbyterians around the world, and in 1940 expanded to include Christians around the world. In our church, we typically celebrate it by using breads from different cultures and by singing hymns from different parts of the world to reinforce the idea of our diversity within unity.

But communion means different things to different people. A woman I know had grown up without a strong faith background and came to a UCC church one Sunday. She was admittedly resistant to the idea of church and the “establishment” it represented, so she was not prepared for an emotional encounter during communion. It was actually the first time she had participated in the Lord’s Supper. When she heard the words of blessing and the words of institution, ate the bread, and drank the wine, she was moved to tears. For her, experiencing the sacrament helped fill the God-shaped hole that Kierkegaard describes.

Sacraments are “mediators of the sacred,” as New Testament scholar Marcus Borg suggests. They help humans bridge what we perceive as a distance between us and God. In Protestant churches, we observe Communion and baptism as the two sacraments. Both were performed by Jesus for others, and both have their roots in Judaism. Baptism has its roots in ritual bathing and the *mikvah* in the Jewish tradition. Blessing the bread – the *Motzi* – includes blessing all food and beverages in the meal, except wine, which is blessed separately in the *Kiddush*.



Communion has historically been interpreted in four primary ways. It may not seem like such a big deal to us in the 21st century, but the various ways theologians thought about what happens during the Lord’s Supper was one of the driving forces in the Protestant Reformation. The arguing parties each thought they had the one true answer about communion. And I’m happy to say that in this congregation, we each are welcome to interpret what happens at the communion table and the experience of receiving the bread and wine.

Historically, there are four key ways communion has been interpreted: transubstantiation, consubstantiation, spiritual presence, and memorialism. (I told Sharon it was a real challenge to make this interesting in a sermon!)

Transubstantiation is the idea that when a priest says the blessing over the bread and wine, they are physically transformed into the body and blood of Christ. Their outward appearance remains the same. This is still the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

Consubstantiation was Luther’s gloss on communion; he said that the bread was still bread, but also the body of Christ, and that the wine was still wine, but also the blood of Christ. (My guess is that just a few of you in this church subscribe to this interpretation.)

Calvin radically departed from others, saying that Christ was spiritually, not materially, present in the Lord's Supper. So, when we celebrate communion, Christ is present with us in spirit. Calvin thought that the act of receiving communion was important not what the elements were made from. (I'll bet that many of you think that.)

And finally, *memorialism* goes back to Jesus' command: "Do this in remembrance of me." We remember the life and teachings of Jesus as we approach this sacrament with careful attention and reverence. (A whole lot of UCC folks probably interpret communion this way.)

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This leaves us with a big "so what?" No matter how a Christian interprets and understands communion, it points to Jesus. Dan Migliore, a Presbyterian theologian who teaches at Princeton Theological Seminary, writes that communion is "the sacrament of human participation in the divine life *by sharing life with each other*. . . Christians cannot eat and drink at this table – where all are welcome and none goes thirsty – and continue to condone any form of discrimination or any social or economic policy that results in hunger or other forms of deprivation. The Lord's Supper is the practice of *Eucharistic hospitality* in which strangers are welcomed into the household of God."¹

John Dominic Crossan, a renowned Jesus scholar, talks about the countercultural aspect of Jesus' eating habits. Some called Jesus a drunkard and a glutton, and others took exception that he ate together with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, and Gentiles. For Jesus, common meals became "eating together without using table as a miniature map of society's vertical discriminations [slave or free] and lateral separations [male or female, Jew or Gentile]. It was a radically egalitarian program that is still projected in the table before us."²

Those four actions I enumerated at the beginning of the sermon – took, blessed, broke, gave – are not accidental. Think of them not just in terms of the liturgical communion act, but in terms of what we can do to feed the world physically and to feed each other spiritually. We *take* the bread given for all of us. We give God *thanks* for the abundance. We *break* it into pieces so that each of us has roughly the same amount. And we *give* it equally among all.

Take. Bless. Break. Give.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Dan Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) p. 225.

² John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 69.