

GATHER THE PEOPLE, TELL THE STORIES, BREAK THE BREAD

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University Congregational Church

October 3, 2010 – World Wide Communion Sunday

Reading: Luke 24: 30-31 (NIV)

When he was at table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight.

Describing the church, John Shea wrote in *Stories of God*, “Gather the folks, tell the stories, break the bread.”¹ And so across the world today people in all kinds of churches have gathered. Some will gather in homes, some in large stone cathedrals, some in simple wooden buildings, and others in thatched huts. They will tell the stories of God, specifically the story of the Lord’s Supper. They will tell stories of the lost and found, the forsaken and redeemed, the first and the last. And they will break bread – all kinds of bread – from sticky wafers, to pita, leavened and unleavened bread, whole grain, and tacos. They will drink of small plastic cups or large chalices grape juice or wine. Some junior high youth group will have communion with cheese puffs and Dr. Pepper. I know of a church that is offering the new low fat communion bread. It’s called, “I can’t believe it’s not Jesus.”

Worldwide Communion Sunday is also the Sunday that many people avoid because of their distaste of the Lord’s Supper in general. In fact, a lot of people avoid any communion service for a variety of reasons. The two principle arguments are:

It takes too much time and it makes us late for the lunch special.

It’s too Catholic.

¹ John Shea, *Stories of God* (Liguori: Liguori Press, 2007), p. 8.

I think the real reason that people do not like Holy Communion is because it has lost all meaning for them. I think people are uncomfortable with the basic images of body and blood and do not know how to reconcile those images with God's love. We are quite estranged from the ancient language of sacrifice and some even wonder if the sacrament isn't just a little too cannibalistic for the modern tongue. We get all hung up on the words, "do this in remembrance of me." We do not know how to have a memory of an experience we never had. Never mind that the real meaning of memory is "to make present." Our only experience of the Eucharist is the rote ceremony; the droning words "take and eat;" and the general confusion of do you chew it or not; does every one wait and eat at the same time; and shouldn't the children behave more properly?

The fact of the matter is that our communion service at University Congregational Church reflects deep Protestant practices. And I have even cut the service as much as I dare, minimized sacrificial language, and tried to use contemporary images and words.

Even that does not quite cut it, does it? We still feel awkward and adrift as to the real meaning of communion. As Protestants we do not have that Catholic sense of obligation and the life-long practice of weekly sacrament. As Congregationalists we have a general skepticism of sacraments and always worry about creeping Catholicism. Where did it all go wrong?

May I suggest that the Lord's Supper lost its place in the lives of our people for a couple of reasons. The first is the fault of church architecture. The Lord's Supper was first practiced in homes or inns. People were gathered around the table board for

their evening meal. They sat around banquet tables just like they would at the local pub. The sacrament was part of the daily breaking of bread, the sharing of meat, nuts, fruits, and wines. Already you can imagine a sense of intimacy or camaraderie. The feeding of the soul was not distinguished from the feeding of the body. Daily stories of the trials and triumphs of work and play were on the hearts and lips of people gathered around the table. Confession and success were shared along with words of absolution and congratulations. For the wounded and worried the words of hope and courage flowed freely and naturally. I imagine that jokes were told and laughter pealed from the company. Children were told to mind their manners and someone had to keep wiping the soup from grandpa's chin. Fathers bit their tongue at the sight of their 16-year-old daughter's Gothic boy friend. His long fingernails were painted black, his nose was pierced with a bone, and a Cobra snake was tattooed around the circumference of his neck.

The layer of what we call the Eucharist was built upon the wondrously human events that were gathered round the fundamental and universal human ritual.

Somebody decided that the common table was not important enough – or sacred enough – to be called the Lord's Table. They decided that the home was not a Holy Space and a special building had to be erected. Unlike the celebration of the Jewish Shabbat, which is prepared for by the mother of the house, these same people thought that very special men should be in charge. Authority figures should always be in front. At first the altar and later the pulpit were placed in front of the people – farther and farther from the masses. People stood throughout the service and only later were pews introduced. I guess the sermons got longer and the Eucharist more

complicated. Then someone with a deep inferiority complex said that the people could not come to the altar or even the chancel. In the 16th century Protestants placed chancel rails in the front of the sanctuary and only the reverend clergy could enter that sacred space. I once visited a cathedral in St. Paul, Minnesota where the entire sanctuary was caged with a tall iron gate. I commented to Mimi, “Hey, look! They’ve put God in jail.” I don’t know what kind of sentence he is serving but I am guessing those priests imagine he’s still locked up.

No longer are people gathered around the table where they can see each other’s faces. Now we get to see the back of someone’s head! If we take communion at the chancel or receive it in our pews we mostly worry about the process. We wonder about those with ability issues. If the alcoholic takes a little cup of wine does that mean they will fall off the wagon? What if the children get the wine instead of the grape juice? In case that is not enough to fret about, did the minister remember to give communion to the choir? Did you see who took communion and who did not? Finally, did you notice who slipped out of the service as soon as the Communion service began? The problem begins with the architecture.

I once consulted with a congregation that had built its church in the 1970’s. The women of the church had decided that they wanted a very tiny kitchen so that no one would expect them to be the cooks and bottle washers of the congregation. What happened was that they found themselves cooking at home and having to cart the food to church and then wonder if there were enough power strips for crock-pots and electric warmers. They were the first to tell me the plan had backfired.

Personally, I think all church architecture should begin with a kitchen, which does not mean that the women should do the cooking. I am talking about a large kitchen. We'll call it "La Cocina de Jesus." Around the kitchen are spacious round tables and plenty of highchairs when needed. These tables will be high enough that a wheel chair can roll comfortably under the tabletop. These are the kinds of tables that can manage spilled gravy or Elmer's glue. I would designate this kitchen and dining area the **sanctuary** where potluck dinners are served and Christ is present with every meal. This would be the chancel where the Word and Table are celebrated and everyone has a place. All are welcome and all are fed. Such a plan would return us to the sacred place that could be every home and inn.

I am going to hazard a guess that the Building Committee of UCC would not likely entertain such an idea. I mean where do you put the pipe organ? So given the limits of architecture and the centuries old assumptions behind it, is there another approach we might take to Holy Communion?

May I suggest that Holy Communion be the reminder of what our dinner at home is meant to be? The Eucharist is meant to recall the purpose of the covered dish dinner, the church picnic, Men's luncheon, Cooks Night Out, Family Night, the Women's Guild luncheon, and the fellowship suppers. Would you even go so far as to think that the Coffee hour is the time when we tell stories, celebrate the presence of one another, and know that God is with us? Now I don't mind telling you that when I eat a homemade oatmeal-nut and raisin cookie, I truly believe that God is with us.

I do not mean to be facetious. The homemade oatmeal-nut and raisin cookie is a gift from the earth, rain, sun, seed, laborer and baker. In his book *No Death, No*

Fear, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote:

“When you eat your bread or your croissant in the morning, eat in such a way that the bread becomes life. Celebrate the Eucharist every morning while breaking the bread or biting into your croissant. Feel alive; feel that you are in touch with the whole cosmos. If the piece of bread is the body of Jesus, it is also the body of the cosmos.”²

Cookies or croissant every meal is a sacred meal that recognizes the providence of God’s generous hand and renders thanks for the staff of life and all who have gathered to tell stories and break bread.

So I invite you to take this Holy Communion. Let it remind you to go to coffee hour and linger with friends and visitors. Take the bread and wine and remember to go to lunch and give thanks for family. Make sure every one tells a story about their week. Listen thoughtfully for the worries and pains. Offer a word of thanks. Remember to share.

After all, isn’t it interesting that in the gospel story I read this morning the disciples did not recognize Jesus. It was only when they sat down to supper and he broke the bread and gave thanks did they know who he was. I would like to think that we would recognize the risen Christ more than three or four times a year. I believe it can happen every time folks gather together, tell stories, and break bread.

Remember?

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² Thich Nhat Hanh, *No Death, No Fear* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2002), p. 117.