

Sunday dinner with the family of God

Message for Sunday, April 5, 2020
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Matthew 26:20-30

Matthew 26:26-28, New International Version:
While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

What does Jesus mean when he says, "This is my body"? What does he mean when he says, "This is my blood"? In a communion service, when we eat the bread and drink the juice, what precisely are we doing?

Over the centuries, Christians have had various answers to this. The Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church both teach the doctrine of *transubstantiation*. They say that, although the bread and wine appear to be the same, their nature or substance changes, so they actually become the body and blood of Jesus.

Martin Luther, during the Reformation, proposed the doctrine of *consubstantiation*, which says that the bread co-exists as both bread and the body of Jesus; and the wine co-exists as both wine and the blood of Jesus.

Some of the other leaders of the Reformation (Zwingli) believed that there is no change at all in the bread and wine. It is a *symbolic memorial*.

Have I put you to sleep yet?

In World War II, soldiers of many different nations and church backgrounds were placed together in prisoner of war camps. Some of them asked a chaplain who was imprisoned with them to hold a communion service, and he gladly agreed.

Of course, the chaplain was used to the traditions of his church: the words of the liturgy, the prayers, the songs. What about those soldiers who came from totally different traditions? He didn't want to make the holy and special sacrament something that

would offend people. So they worshipped in silence.

He led in prayer... saying the words silently. Everyone else prayed quietly, each one in his own way.

He held up the bread – and here was another difficulty: they didn't have any bread or wine to use! He simply mimed it, acting as if everything was normal. He silently blessed and broke the invisible bread. He passed around this loaf of invisible bread, and the men each broke off a piece and ate it.

He poured invisible wine into a cup, held it up for all to see, silently prayed over it, then passed it around. Each man drank from the cup.

I can't imagine what doctrine the theologians would come up with to describe what happened there. But as for the men, to them it was a holy moment, one that they never forgot, even after the war was over. Jesus was invisible in that service, but very, very present.

Of course, what communion means also depends on the people involved — *real* people, not textbook figures — people with bunions and bruises, with tempers and teardrops, with histories and heart-aches, people whose cars wouldn't start because they left the lights on just like I do, people who burn their toast, who forget to spring forward and fall back (and then arrive late for church — or maybe early?), people who try hard to know God but can't seem to, at least not in the way their more saintly friends seem to, who want to follow the Golden Rule but find it hard to love their neighbour when the neighbour's dog hasn't read the Golden Rule and has left a deposit in their front yard.

Let me paint a picture for you of a communion service. It's a tradition where people come forward to the rail to receive communion.

The minister stands behind the rail, looking like a judge in his black robe. He's short and overweight, but even so, the robe is too short for him; it barely hangs below his knees. He's sweating, and his heavy black glasses threaten to slip down his nose every time he leans forward to serve someone.

The first person is a young mother, rocking back and forth like a rocking chair, with her baby asleep in her arms. He is peaceful now, this infant who, only a week before at his baptism, squealed and squirmed and almost slipped out of the arms of the nervous minister. She cradles the baby on her forearm the way Mary might have cradled Jesus at the manger, and as the minister hands her the bread and juice, all she hears is, “My body ... for you.” And she recalls the pain of the birth, the excruciating pain, and yet the exquisite feeling afterwards that it was all worthwhile. “My body ... for you.” And she smiles a wide, loving smile.

The next person is a lady with a scarf on her head. She looks like a *baboushka*, a Russian grandmother, or like a Mexican peasant preparing to work in the fields under the hot summer sun. But the woman is just a regular middle class working woman. Under the scarf there’s no hair. She is bald as a billiard ball. From the chemotherapy. You see, she’s had a mastectomy, a breast removed by surgery, and the chemotherapy was to make sure they got it all.

As the minister stands in front of her and bends down, her long thin fingers receive the bit of bread from his thick fingers. Her hands shake as she reaches forward, one hand cradling the other, offering it support. She doesn’t remember the juice or the blessing. All she hears is her name and the words, “My body, broken for you.” It’s like she’s hearing it for the first time: “My body, broken for you.” She bites down on the bread, and then on her lower lip as the tears begin like a sudden summer shower.

There are two little girls in pigtails kneeling next to her, one seven, the other eight, kneeling and giggling into their palms as they look at the minister’s shoes. The eight-year-old whispers, “Look! He’s wearing brown socks with a blue suit!” Looking down, they’re caught off guard by the minister as he hands them their bread and juice. They flash sweet smiles that say thank-you, and the minister smiles back the way ministers always do.

The seven-year-old, when she tastes the pasty bread in her mouth, remembers tuna fish sandwiches and a picnic the day before with her parents at their grandparents’ cottage. Even now, she can feel the

warm sunshine, and the secure feeling of being with her family.

The eight-year-old chews the bread while balancing the grape juice almost under her nose, poised and ready to wash down the gummy bread. For an instant she breathes in through her nose, and the sweet smell of the juice captures her. Her mind flashes to the last day of school back in June, when her class had a picnic and a play day. They had played soccer baseball, and she had gotten on base — kicked the ball right out of the infield for her first time ever. And when one of the other girls kicked a home run, the two of them ran together to home plate, jumping and cheering all the way. Then the whole team was hugging, for the game was over. Then everyone, winners and losers, had poured grape juice out of the pitchers they had brought. After sitting in the sun, the juice was warm, warm like the communion grape juice, and the warmth seemed to add to its sweetness.

The minister moved on to a balding man with a big tin button on his collar that says something about turning forty. He has a salt-and-pepper mustache which curls not quite into a handlebar mustache at the ends. He’s still wearing his police uniform, having just got off the night shift, where he had a lot of extra paperwork to finish. He’s never been much of a churchgoer — at least not since he left Sunday School in his teens. That was especially true after he watched his buddy get shot to pieces when they had busted a drug dealer. The dealer had been aiming for him; his buddy grabbed the shotgun, and got hit instead. But something happened to him since then. And now, for the umpteenth time, he begins to cry at communion, at the words, “My body, broken for you; my blood, shed for you.” But they aren’t just tears of grief and loss; they are also cleansing tears, tears of a gradual healing.

Alongside him kneels another young man, his brother, several years younger, starting to go bald the same way the elder brother did, and he, too, weeps. But the two are different. To the younger brother, “This is my blood” brings up images of his friends in the gay community who have died of AIDS. Last year he found that he has AIDS, too. When he told his family, his parents were shocked that he was gay, and horrified that he was dying; but they loved him just the same. His brother was just

shocked. Things have changed there, too, and now at the communion rail, they clasp their hands together and share their grief.

Next to them an old lady kneels, knowing nothing of the two brothers' thoughts. Her gray hair is in a bun at the back of her head, and her face is furrowed with deep wrinkles. Her arthritis makes kneeling difficult, and whenever the minister says, "My body broken," she always thinks first of her knees. But this day — whether it was the organ music or the flag in the corner, who knows? — on this day her mind takes her back to VE day, to the toasts she drank with friends that the war was over, that husbands and boyfriends would be returning. Most of them, at least. She looks forward to that great communion in heaven.

The young man in his twenties who waits beside her has the facial features of someone with Down's Syndrome. His hair is crew-cut, and he has a broad grin that sweeps across his entire face. His head moves constantly as he tries, like a curious child, to see what everyone else is doing. The smile widens even more when the minister calls him by his name — by his own special name, Charlie — and hands him his very own bread and juice. The words don't mean much to him — juice is juice and bread is bread — but it's obvious he enjoys being part of something bigger than himself. After he eats and drinks, he looks at the people on either side of him and shares his grin with them.

In some ways the young man is no different from the widow beside him. She is thin and gray, with a warm smile. Her husband died the day after his retirement, five years earlier, and the wound, though healing, is still fresh. No, the boy with Down's Syndrome isn't far from her, for she, too has felt wrapped in the arms, the loving arms, of this body of Christ, this body of believers gathered in Jesus' name. The fellowship, the compassion, the comforting love — they were there just when she needed it most.

I could go on and on, because there are at least as many communion experiences as there are people. And each person has many communion experiences. Who knows what will be triggered by the smell of bread and juice, by their taste or the weight of them in one's mouth? Maybe it will be

the smell of incense or candles, or the sun streaking through a stained glass window; a Bible passage or the words to the fourth verse of a new hymn. Maybe it will be the quiet, or the singing of the organ, or a neighbour's hand reaching out to touch yours.

Somehow, something connects, and a person comes face-to-face with God.

Who can say? Who knows how we will meet God in all this — in this ritual that is planned, but that allows for the unplanned, this meeting of the human spirit with the Holy Spirit of God? The experience may bring pain and pleasure, healing and forgiveness, a release from guilt and the strength to risk. Or it may bring simply a family feeling, a sense of being loved and care for and part of something bigger than yourself. It may be a time to cast out fear and doubt, to be comforted as we walk through the Valley of the shadow of death by the One who walks with us.

If we come seeking God, then God will seek us. Like the father of the prodigal son, God will rush to meet us with open arms of love.

What then, is communion? It's whatever it is that happens when we come together and in Christ's name, share the bread and the cup, and say, "This is my body, broken for you. Take and eat. This is my blood, shed for you. Drink of it, all of you."

Please join me at the Lord's table.