

**19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Worldwide Communion Sunday**  
**the Rev. Michelle Slater**

**October 3, 2010**  
**“Bread for the Journey”**

I have been lucky enough to worship in a few different countries and languages. I've taken communion in Italy and Mexico, in Israel and Tanzania, in Cuba and Quebec City. And whether it was Spanish or Swahili, I could usually tell what was happening in the service, and especially so during the communion service. Because of the distinctive actions associated with communion – taking the bread, blessing it, breaking it, and sharing it – that particular four-fold action that is the substance of this ritual. Even if we don't completely understand the words, even in English, or what Jesus really means when he says, “This is my body...this is my blood...” these bodily actions, physical movements, yield a deeper meaning and reminder.

It was St. Paul who wrote the earliest account of Jesus' last supper with his friends, his last Passover meal. He says that according to the tradition told to him, “the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

It's remarkable, when you think about it, that this ritual has been practiced, over and over again, for some 2,000 years, and in substantially the same format, though with a variety of names: Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. Yet although this ritual, the celebration of communion, has included the same elements and the same words, in whatever language, for thousands of years, there are at the same time, many different understandings of what exactly we're doing, what exactly happens, or even if anything special happens at all, when we take the bread and the cup.

For some Christians, when we take communion, we are remembering, remembering the last supper Jesus had with his friends, before he was killed by the Roman authorities, killed because he dared to confront the powers of violence that kept poor people poor, and marginalized people on the margins. In this understanding, called “memorialism” we take communion as a memorial, as a remembrance of Jesus' life and death and resurrection, as he told us to do. For this memorialist view of communion, the bread and the cup are symbols, metaphors, of Jesus' self-giving, and so we remember him by taking these symbols, by re-enacting this same meal.

For some other Christians, we not only remember Jesus' last meal, and then his death and resurrection, but we actually, mystically and mysteriously, take part in it. In this understanding, something happens to the bread and the cup when we eat and drink, and Jesus is present in them, and hence, in us, in a powerful way. In our Reformed tradition, the tradition of John Calvin, Jesus is really present with us by the power of the

Holy Spirit, and we are spiritually fed by his presence. In the Anglican and Lutheran tradition, the “real presence” of Jesus is affirmed in the bread and the wine, in some mysterious way. And for Roman Catholics, the belief is that the bread and the wine actually become Jesus’ physical body and blood, the doctrine of “transubstantiation.” In this view, the bread and the wine don’t change in their appearance or their physical properties but their real, true reality are as Jesus’ body and blood.

You can see why the earliest Christians were sometimes accused of being cannibals! Because each Sunday morning, they gathered together to remember the Sunday morning when everything changed for them: when the one they loved and had lost, Jesus, had been restored to them, raised to new life. Each Sunday morning was another celebration of that rising, a little Easter, and each one included the communion meal, taking that bread and cup in memory of Jesus’ giving of his body and his blood, to rejoice that he was alive again and with them in every time and place.

For those who only heard stories of this ritual, or saw it once or twice without knowing the context, it looked an awful lot like those early Christians were eating actual flesh and blood, or at least, were pretending to. And for some of us, that is the part about communion that can make us a bit squeamish. Especially, for me anyway, the blood part.

For some people, this is such a problem that they don’t take communion, or they do but feel uncomfortable, or they don’t even come to church at all when we’re having communion. Because the ritual of eating Jesus’ body and drinking Jesus’ blood, is not only offensive, but downright bizarre.

Part of the reason it’s so bizarre to us, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is because we’re so far away from Jesus’ original followers. They were, of course, Jewish, as Jesus was, and so deeply steeped in the Jewish religious system of animal sacrifices. In the Jewish world of Jesus’ time, when significant moments happened in your life, either of thanksgiving and rejoicing, or of confession of guilt and repentance, they were marked by a sacrifice, either of money or grain or an animal. If you were repenting of some sin, then your sacrifice would bring you back into right relationship with God.

So for these early Jewish-Christians, with a worldview framed by the reality and power of animal sacrifices to God, it made perfect sense to interpret Jesus’ death, coming at the same time as the Passover sacrifice, in that framework, as a sacrifice. But not just any sacrifice: rather, the once and for all sacrifice, a death that would close the gap, bridge the distance, reconcile the relationship between God and humanity forevermore.

Now, I’m pretty sure none of us are making animal sacrifices in our backyard when we want to make things right with God! So this part of the Jesus story, and of the celebration of communion, can seem not only bizarre and weird, but also offensive. Imagine, pretending to eat somebody’s flesh and blood, or even actually believing that you are!

And yet...you knew there would be an “and yet.” And yet...perhaps there is something in the very offensiveness that makes it important or even vital, for us to

participate in it. Whether we believe that Jesus is actually, really present in the bread and cup, or merely symbolically or metaphorically, there is still real, physical pain and brokenness in the world. There are still bodies being broken by oppression and violence, still flesh being torn apart by greed and hatred. Perhaps we are to take communion so as to be reminded of that, to be confronted with the offensive, obscene suffering that still exists in our world, and to be reminded that God suffers with each person, each human body, who suffers. So our discomfort with eating Jesus' body has a purpose: to call us again and again to participate in God's yearning for peace and justice, to give of ourselves as Jesus did for the cause of abundant life for all.

And perhaps we are to take the cup, with its uncomfortably red liquid, because blood has always been, and continues to be, a powerful symbol for life. Not even a symbol, really: blood literally is life itself, living cells that bring us oxygen, and nutrients, and disease fighting agents, and carry away carbon dioxide and waste and disease. There is no life for us, without blood. And because it is so powerful for us, we have a visceral response to it, and often, a deep aversion to it. We don't shy away from things the way we do blood, unless it has power for us; in this case, the power of life. And so we take this cup, and drink, to remind us that though blood is being shed in many places around the world, that life is also being given, is rising again and again, even in the most hopeless of situations.

Of course, this isn't the only meaning of communion. At this table, we are also reminded of all the ways and times God's people have been fed in Scripture, with manna in the wilderness, with miraculous feedings of five thousands on a hill in Galilee. And we look ahead to the kingdom of God, when all will be fed, with a foretaste of the great banquet that Jesus says the kingdom of God is like, where everyone has a place.

It is about all this, and more. Death, and life. Brokenness, and healing. Hurt, and reconciliation. Looking backward, and looking ahead. Symbol, and material reality. This is powerful stuff, the stuff that communion is made of, so I guess it shouldn't surprise us that it requires powerful, even offensive symbols. Because the ultimate scandal, the ultimate offense, is that God took the chance to become a human being in Jesus. When we celebrate communion, when we take these powerful and offensive symbols inside of us, we are reminded again that God is with us, not in a hazy or vague or distant way, but in a real, tangible, concrete way, as real as our flesh, as tangible as our blood, as concrete as food and drink.

So perhaps, taking communion should make us uncomfortable. Uncomfortable, but not unworthy. For too long, some people felt too ashamed to take communion, to come that close to God, because their church tradition taught that only the most worthy, the most sinless, could receive it. Yet Jesus' whole life was given to those who were most unworthy, to including those who were the most outcast.

So no, let us not feel unworthy. Uncomfortable, yes, or at least, attentive to the strangeness of what we are doing, if only to remind us of the greatest strangeness of all:

that we are loved so much that God comes to be with us, not only in Jesus, in human flesh and blood; not only in this bread and cup, but in every moment of our lives. Suffering with us, rejoicing with us, bringing healing when we are broken, and hope when we are despairing, and life when all we know is death. May this good news, this gospel, be bread for the journey for us, not only today, but every day. Amen.