

Communion, Holy

Acts 2:42-47, Matthew 26:26-30

Center Church, Hartford

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On our retreat a few weeks ago, many of you remarked on how much the early church revolved around “breaking bread,” eating together on a regular basis. We know that those meals often included some time of remembering Jesus’ sharing of bread and wine with the disciples before his death, saying that now, for them, bread is more than bread: it is the deep reminder of the presence of Jesus with them and in them, always.

Did you hear how eating together, knowing that Jesus was with them, affected how the meal went? The translation we use said they ate their food “with glad and generous hearts.” Others translate it this way: (Message) “every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful,” and (NEB) “shared food with unaffected joy.”

In fact, when they ate together, others saw them and were so excited by this joy, this gladness and their generous sharing, that they wanted to be part of the group, too!

Every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful! I sometimes wonder how we traveled from that to the very solemn and serious way most Christians in the West receive Holy Communion. We expect quiet and soft, meditative music and serious faces. We often tell children to hush because this is somber business we are about. The message we communicate is that Jesus becoming one with us is, somehow, almost sad. Someone once told me they thought Holy Communion was about death.

It's not.

It's about Jesus living in and through us.

It's about life.

Jesus wanted to leave his disciples with a power of life, a power of hope, of not giving up or in, strength to endure, and a community that understood God's exuberant, bodacious love and wanted to share it. Listen to the language: what I do is called “celebrating” Holy Communion, and in other traditions, the priest is called the “celebrant.”

What can “celebrate” mean in the context of this meal?

Let's think about what they did. It wasn't balloons and party favors and entertainment. The joy came, I think, from the deep gratitude of being convinced that not only were they forgiven of, whatever, they were also loved, whatever, by a God with a glad and generous heart. They found a community of openness and inclusion.

They found a community with a moral compass centered on love. They found a community that believed each of them had gifts to share that were worthy of God, no matter what those gifts were. They found a safe space in the midst of a world of confusion and fear.

They found sanctuary. That word has become too often identified with a place rather than a human interaction. Originally the "sanctuary" for Christians had walls made of human bodies shaped into the body of Christ; the physical space mattered little. The joy came from each other.

On Thursday morning when I was driving to work, I happened to hear an old favorite song of mine, Don Henley's 1989 song, "The Heart of the Matter." I was so struck by the timeliness of this verse:

"These times are so uncertain
There's a yearning undefined
People filled with rage.
We all need a little tenderness,
How can love survive in such a graceless age."

The only answer to that question I know comes with what happens to us as we eat and drink together. We work so hard at remembering Jesus that we are filled with joy that God had the audaciousness of cosmic-powered love to take on human flesh and risk all the garbage we could throw at that love in order not to put us down, but to pull us up. Amazing. And other people have experienced this and been changed by it! Amazing. And when I forget this and lose my way in such a graceless age, I can come here with you and eat the same bread and drink from the same cup and be renewed, finding the power to try to make myself more like Jesus, daily. Amazing.

Here's what I would like us to do today. Usually when we hand you a piece of bread and invite you to dip it in the cup, we say something like "the body of Christ and the cup of blessing." When you take the bread today and dip it in the cup, I invite you to say, out loud if possible, soft or loud as you choose, "Amazing!"

Beloved, "holy" does not mean sad and somber. It means, "amazing." How wonderful to eat with you today. Amen.