

Holy Communion I

Let us begin by counting our blessings.

Holy Communion, as we know it, is rooted in what happened at the Last Supper, where the bread and wine on the table were obviously important to the Passover celebration (or whatever else it was that they were doing!) and likely candidates for reinterpretation and theological renewal. Jesus was good at this sort of thing, and whether your folk understand it as a memorial of that meal or whether you can actually make some sense of the odd poetry of the Gospel of John about “body” and “blood,” pretty much all of us know that on some regular basis we have take the elements, bless them, break the bread (if we are paying real close attention to what Jesus did every time he held the stuff), and give it to our congregations. It doesn’t take much to see the connections between what Jesus offered his disciples and the bread and wine used in the Jewish Passover meal.

But imagine what life would be like if the sacrament were rooted in another story, say, the Feeding of the Five Thousand. Bread is offered ... and fish, probably dried or smoked. Imagine what the holy caretakers of your sanctuary (called the “Altar Guild” in my tradition) would have to deal with to present bread and fish to your congregation on a regular basis, whether weekly, monthly or on whatever schedule you offer communion.

If your first thought goes to refrigeration, please remember that this wasn’t widely available even a hundred years ago, let alone in the sanctified days when your denomination was founded. And because, “we’ve never done it that way before!” are as holy as any words that Isaiah, Jesus or Paul ever spoke, knowing what John Calvin did with his fish on Sundays has liturgical import to this day. Inevitably the question would arise, “Do fish sticks count?”

Recently I attended a service where the preacher so seamlessly wove the Feeding of the Five Thousand story with his congregation’s understanding of communion that I was actually disappointed that we weren’t served right there and then.

Though I love my tradition’s practice of communion, I have been deeply moved by the experience of it in other traditions. I am a student of, and more than that a great fan of, small denominations – what some might call sects. I have several times visited the Amana Colonies, the remnants of a German pietist settlement in central Iowa. The Amana Church community which occupied some seven villages surrounding a valley around the Iowa River, celebrates communion just

once a year, generally in the Fall. Bread and wine are the sacramental elements, but because of the timing, wine made from local grapes was not available in that season. But the wine made from rhubarb, harvested in the spring, was ready for drinking by then and so “Piestengel” was the element prayed over and served.

Historically, bread and that unusual wine were the elements of communion offered to adults. The Amana Church also offered communion in a separate service to children, though with different elements. A guide answering questions in one of the Amana churches told me that children were offered cake and hot chocolate as their communion elements. I couldn't help but wonder if there wasn't a moment of disappointment for young people as they experienced communion for the first time in the adult church.

The word “communion” itself conjures images of closeness and intimacy, as if we are snuggling up to God as we come forward to the altar. But in its fullness, communion is way more powerful than that. I once had a chance to visit Solomon's Porch, a congregation in Minneapolis founded and still led by Doug Pagitt, a brilliant teacher and preacher and a challenging consultant. I don't know how often they celebrate communion, but the Sunday evening I was there, they did and it was introduced in a remarkable way. Though that part of the service was led by a lay person, whose prayers were both inspired and inspiring, Pagitt welcomed us to the several tables where bread and wine (and/or grape juice) were laid out, more or less, with the following exhortation.

“Communion at Solomon's Porch is something we choose to share with each other. When you are ready, please go to a table. You may choose to offer it to someone else standing there, or you may want to wait until someone offers it to you. We hope you will both give and receive, but some days you may just want one or the other.

“Last week, we had some tough meetings about our building, and where we might go next once this lease is up, and what we feel about owning property or just passing through. I heard a lot of hard words at that meeting, and I know there were some hard feelings. Tonight, make sure you share communion with someone you might have disagreed with. Some of you, like me, may need to share communion with several people. Remember, there is no communion without reconciliation.”

Holiest bread I ever ate.