

Eucharist

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[0 : 00] I want to begin this sermon with a comic. Namely, because when I saw it, I thought of the table church, and specifically of Pastor Angela, and wondered when we too would have a tofu option.

It has no relation to my sermon, other than that I liked it, and that we're going to be talking about the audacity of communion today. We are on week three of our August series, focused on rebuilding a broken faith.

And it's a curious thing that what seems to most bind the history of humanity is our ability to consistently mess up what God has given us. The Bible, much like romantic comedies, is basically the same story, over and over again, just with different characters.

God loves and cares for humanity and gives abundantly. Then humanity does something to mess it up, and yet God still pours out love to humanity and creates a way for humanity to be redeemed. As we've explored what it means to rebuild a broken faith, we first explored the purpose and power of baptism with Pastor Anthony, where we were reminded that baptism is an opportunity to be welcome into a new family.

[1 : 25] Pastor Angela then reminded us of our place in the shared story of the Bible, and how that story is not about perfection, but rather about God using people in their imperfection.

And this week, we have the opportunity to think about the Eucharist, otherwise known as communion. If we continue the family theme that we've seen emerging in the last couple weeks, we can permit communion to be analogous to a family reunion at its best.

The family reunion where everyone in the family is welcome with open arms, no matter their backstory, their oddities, and no longer how long they've been away from the family.

The tradition of the Eucharist is one that is rooted in the earliest traditions of the Christian faith, as a remembrance of Jesus' final Passover supper with his disciples.

The word Eucharist itself comes from the writing of St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, where he writes, for I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, Eucharist itself, he broke it and said, this is my body, which is for you.

[2 : 49] Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he also took the cup after supper, saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.

For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. This word, Eucharist, is Greek literally for giving thanks.

So when we think about coming to the communion table, it is a meal, an opportunity of thanksgiving. Now the term Eucharist is a name given to this practice, this rite, as early as the didache, which is a writing that's dated to the late first century and referenced by various early church fathers.

And while the word Eucharist is still used by many more liturgical traditions, some of us may have grown up in traditions that use different words, refer to the Eucharist as communion, or the Lord's Supper.

Whatever you call it, the meaning is the same. And I want to take a moment to explore the history. In part because we can only understand how we are able to rebuild the practice if we understand what it meant to Jesus' earliest followers, and more importantly, what Jesus himself was calling us to.

[4 : 08] Now, as many of us may be aware, the words spoken each week at communion mirror the words Jesus used, as they are recorded in the Gospels at his last Passover supper on this earth.

And we see the practice of bringing people to the table in thanksgiving was deeply rooted in the early church. We see, for example, in Acts 2, 42 through 46, a description of early Christians and saying that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. As I also mentioned earlier, the Eucharist was recorded in some of the earliest church writings, including the didache, which is basically a brief, anonymous early Christian treatise.

It's not in the Bible, but it begins with the line, the teaching of the Lord to the nations by the 12 apostles. This text deals with Christian ethics, rituals such as baptism in the Eucharist, and church organization.

[5 : 31] Chapter 9 and 10 focus on the Eucharist, but I actually just want to read chapter 9, in part because I think it's helpful for us to to read what was being written about the Eucharist early on.

So it reads, But concerning the Eucharist, after this fashion, give you thanks. First, concerning the cup, we thank thee, our Father, for the holy vine, David thy son, which thou hast made known unto us through Jesus Christ thy son, to thee be the glory forever.

And concerning the broken bread, we thank thee, our Father, for the life and knowledge which thou hast made known unto us through Jesus thy son, to thee be the glory forever.

As this broken bread was once scattered to the mountains, and after it had been brought together, became one. So may thy church be gathered together from the ends of the earth unto thy kingdom. For thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever. And let none eat or drink of your Eucharist, but such as have been baptized into the name of the Lord.

[6 : 32] For of a truth the Lord has said concerning this, give not that which is holy unto dogs. We'll return to that last part in a moment. Now, early church leaders talked about the Eucharist at length.

St. Augustine, Clement of Alexandria, Cyril, Origen, and even Tertullian. Now, if you've ever taken an intro to Bible course in your life, these are likely all the people you skimmed and then promptly forgot about.

And I promise I'm not going to make you read anything they wrote today. But what's important to understand is that these various church leaders and theological scholars were shaping Christian thought during the second and third century, and they were wrestling with fully understanding what the Eucharist meant for the people of God, for the followers of Jesus.

Now, given that there were so many people trying to understand and explain and capture the Eucharist, it is no wonder that at times the Eucharist has been used not for God's purpose, but for man's purpose instead.

In fact, when I was given the opportunity to talk about the Eucharist today, the first thing that came to mind was an interaction I had at Table Kids Church. Now, I will tell you, if you want to be challenged, and I mean really challenged, with tough, thoughtful questions, teach Kids Church at the Table.

[7 : 57] There was one particular day that we were talking about communion, and a seven-year-old of a visiting family, so no current Table parents need to be worried about this story. But this seven-year-old, as we were talking about communion, shot his hand up in the air and confidently stated, I'm not sure I should take communion, because if I'm not right with God when I do, I will be struck by lightning.

Zero doubt in his mind. Communion was a terrifying thought to him. Now, I can't say for sure, but given the translation error rate of young kids from what the parent actually said to what they then communicate to their teachers, I would feel safe guessing that this was not exactly what his parents taught him.

But that's not really the point. A practice that is meant to be redemptive, that is meant to be filling, rejuvenating, to the seven-year-old was scary, cold, and distant.

It was something to be afraid of doing it wrong. Unfortunately, I believe the seven-year-old's articulation of his feelings towards communion don't differ that much from a lot of the feelings many adults wrestle with.

See, even early on, there were efforts to explain who is in and who is out as it relates to the communion table. Despite early church efforts to open their doors to everyone, despite Jesus' ministry expanding who was welcome at his table, as communion practices became formalized, there were requirements that started to be built.

[9 : 40] lines drawn for who is allowed at God's table and who is not. Since we've had nearly 2,000 years to create lines, the list is honestly endless.

But just as some examples, people can be denied communion because they haven't been baptized or haven't been baptized in a specific denomination or in a specific church.

They can be denied communion because they've been divorced, because they use contraception, because they are menstruating, because they are LGBTQ or they affirm LGBTQ people, because they are non-Catholics or non-Baptists or non-members of X church or denomination.

The church has a history of precluding people from certain communion tables based on race or ethnicity or socioeconomic class or a variety of other identifiers.

And these are just the exclusions of those who are even welcome to the meal in the first place.

Never mind the exclusions of who is permitted to hold the elements and serve communion.

[10 : 52] A role in many traditions that has also been limited by race and gender and sexual orientation and education level and even marital status. What's so fascinating, though, about these lists of restrictions is that they're not in the Bible.

Now, even the didache, which is one of the earliest texts, which seems to indicate simultaneously the expansiveness of the communion table. One of my favorite pieces from that early writing is that description, the as this broken bread was once scattered on the mountains and after it had brought together became one, so may thy church be gathered together from the ends of the earth unto thy kingdom.

That expansive view of how communion connects the church is followed by an interesting line that says, oh, by the way, be baptized before communion.

So why? Why are we restricting people from God's table? Why are we preventing people from entering a space Jesus so willingly invited us into?

Well, often, the answer is rooted on a passage in Corinthians where we are told in Corinthians 11, 27 through 30, so then whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.

[12 : 24] Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.

Now, naturally, we've taken this passage to mean that somehow those in power, imperfect leaders of the church, are charged with determining whether you have sufficiently examined yourself before taking communion and have offered a number of red lines.

But when we read the words of Paul, and I will note that this is even one step removed from Jesus, the same Jesus who permitted Judas to be part of the first communion, Paul's words say that it is on each individual to examine ourselves and see whether we are in place to take communion.

This is why at the table we state that ours is an open table. Welcome to all who know that they are in need of God's grace. Because you've got to check yourself.

And I always say if you need two helpings of grace, just break off a little extra bread that day. It is not the role of the church to determine whether you're welcome at God's table.

[13 : 40] Because communion isn't about the pastor or the denomination or the building. Communion is a remembrance of the abundance of God's grace and of the expansiveness of Jesus' ministry.

In order for us then to rebuild our understanding of communion and its purpose and power in our lives, I want to return to the night we are called to remember.

If we turn to Matthew in chapter 26, we often skip right to verse 26 to 28. But I want us to take a few steps back and start with verse 17. On the first day of the festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?

Jesus replied, go into the city to a certain man and tell him, the teacher says, my appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.

So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the twelve. And while they were eating, he said, truly I tell you, one of you will betray me.

[14:58] They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, surely you don't mean me, Lord. Jesus replied, the one who has dipped his hands into the bowl with me will betray me.

The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man. It would be better for him if he had not been born. Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, surely you don't mean me, Rabbi.

Jesus answered, you have said so. Now, I want to put this in context. We're at a Passover meal, which is a commemoration of freedom from slavery from the Egyptians.

It's an important remembrance of what God has done. And here, everyone's eating and enjoying their Passover, and Jesus says, one of you is going to betray me.

That's some heavy dinner conversation. But he doesn't stop there. After that, if we continue to read, while they are still eating, Jesus took the bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, take and eat.

[16:12] This is my body. Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, there are some important things that I don't want us to miss about this story, about Jesus' story for us. Because ultimately, the gospel, the good news that we are called to is that Jesus came, Jesus died, and Jesus rose again for us.

And here, in this moment, Jesus is teaching his disciples one more lesson. He's demonstrating his gospel in action by reminding his disciples who that sacrifice is for, who is welcome at the table in his kingdom.

And the first thing is that there were majorly flawed people at Jesus' table, and the table was open to them, too. Most obvious of an example, of course, is that Jesus knew and took time during that very dinner to point out to his disciples that one among them would betray Jesus, that one among them would hurt Jesus, meant ill for Jesus, literally sold Jesus' life.

And yet, when Jesus said, take and eat, this is my body, Jesus didn't exclude even the one he knew would betray him. But Judas wasn't the only one at that table who would falter.

[17:55] If we continue to read in Matthew and just pick up at verse 31, just a couple of verse later, this is the very same night that Jesus also tells Peter that Peter will deny Jesus three times.

Verse 31 reads, Then Jesus told them, This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written, I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.

But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee. Peter replied, Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.

Truly I tell you, Jesus answered, this very night before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times. So Jesus told everyone at that table that they were going to fall away.

They were going to fail Jesus. And yet Jesus chose to share this table with people he knew would fail him. He knew weren't perfect. Jesus knew before he offered Peter bread and wine.

[19:05] And yet Jesus didn't say, My body is broken for everyone, but Judas who's going to get me killed and Peter who's going to say, he doesn't know me. He didn't say, My blood is shed for a new covenant for everyone but Peter and Judas.

No, Jesus left his statement wholly unqualified. His body was broken for everyone at that table. His blood would be shed for everyone at that table.

And this is the second point, that Jesus' statement was simple. Take and eat. Never did Jesus say, Take and eat if. What I believe is so audacious about communion is that it is inviting people to dine with God and it has no restrictions on access.

And this would have been equally audacious to the Jewish people in that time who only permitted certain people into the holiest places in the temple, who had literal physical boundaries between the sacred and the human, who acquired ritual purity to enter spaces with the divine.

Yet Jesus in this moment is demolishing those barriers, is inviting people as they are to dine with the divine.

[20:26] I think even today we are so programmed, particularly in Western tradition, to focus on whether we earned something. That it seems nearly impossible for us to accept what we've been

given freely.

Grace with no works needed. And part of that is that I think in some ways we've been taught that things that are valuable must be limited.

And so we work so hard to segregate, to categorize, to label, because there must be a finite in-crown for something to be worth it.

Yet Jesus spent his life, his ministry, erasing boundaries, destroying frameworks, and uplifting the worth in each person he interacted with.

Reverend Gomes in his book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, *What's So Good About the Good News*, puts it this way, the claim of a God bigger than those who worship him, more gracious, more generous, more hospitable than those than they are, is at the core of what Jesus calls the good news or the gospel.

[21 : 43] And it ought to be good news that God is bigger than we are. See, communion is a representation of a God bigger than those who worship, of a God more gracious and more hospitable than our imperfect and broken selves can be.

There are no ifs connected to Jesus' invitation to the communion table. Just simple commands. Take and eat. Drink from it.

All of you. It is because, and this is my third point, that the table is meant to be a reminder of the gospel message. In this moment, Jesus tells his disciples that the wine, the cup, represents the blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for the forgiveness of sins.

Fundamental to experiencing God's table is experiencing grace and grace abundant. In engaging in the remembrance of Jesus' life, we also remember Jesus' death and we remember Jesus' victory through resurrection.

We remember his promise of salvation. Communion is meant to be a moment of grace remembered, a reminder of our place in God's family, of the open invitation to the family reunion no matter what baggage we bring, no matter how long we've been gone, no matter how weird we are.

[23 : 20] And last, we can't forget that Jesus is creating this new moment, this practice of communion, this Eucharist, in the context of an old moment, Passover.

Now, any Jewish person, which includes all of Jesus' disciples, and of course Jesus himself, would have understood that this moment, this meal, the Passover, had deep significance.

It was a commemoration of the exodus from Egyptian bondage. It is a commemoration of their literal freedom from slavery. And Jesus communicates so much in this moment when he takes the bread, the very unleavened bread that symbolizes the end of slavery for the Jewish people and says, take and eat because this is my body.

See, to fully understand the audacity of communion, we have to understand the context in which Jesus is inviting us all to come together. Jesus is saying that my body, my sacrifice, is your unleavened bread.

It is your freedom from slavery, from the chains that bind you. That is what grace in abundance means. The context is important when we rebuild our understanding and practice of communion.

[24 : 52] communion. So my challenge to all of you is this. If you've allowed communion to become a rote pattern or something that seems more chore than renewal or if you fear the communion table for whatever reason, I want to challenge you to reclaim your seat at God's table.

Communion is a radical act of grace, a subversion of the legalism and hypocrisy. It's subversive for the very reason that as Jesus establishes, it takes what has been held in tradition and kept from those people deemed unworthy by other people.

And it supplants that moment the unleavened bread that commemorates release from physical chains with living water that promises eternal life.

We're told in John chapter 6 verse 35 that Jesus declares I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

In communion we are remembering that Jesus is replacing the physical freedom with spiritual freedom. He is replacing the finite and limited with the infinite and eternal.

[26 : 23] Now honestly communion is something that has always meant a lot to me. It's part of what drew me to the table church initially that it was practiced every week because it was a reminder that no matter where I was at no matter what was going on I was always invited back into community with God that God had asked me to remember that relationship that closeness that desire for God even when I didn't like myself.

And for a while at the table it was myself Pastor Ramon and Pastor Angela that were effectively rotating as communion hosts which meant that every week some different group was likely offended by our communion table which for me meant we were probably doing as Jesus would hope because I think that there is something to retain in the radical nature of communion in the audacity of this meal and what it means for Jesus' followers.

See the table was never meant to be a place of fear or concern it was always meant to be a place of renewal and redemption the table was never meant to be a barrier to a relationship with God it was always meant to be a catalyst and a meeting place so if you need to rebuild what the communion table means to you remember first that there were majorly flawed people at Jesus' table and the table was open to them too second that Jesus' statements at that meal were simple take and eat Jesus didn't say take and eat if third that the table is meant to be a reminder of the gospel message and the abundant grace promised in that and fourth that in this celebration in this thanksgiving that is the Eucharist Jesus is creating a new moment in the context of an old moment of Passover and in that reminding us that we are freed spiritually reminding us that that is what God has promised us despite anything we do so as we enter communion now

I want to challenge you to let go of any barriers to this space and instead reclaim your place at God's table that it might be a space that takes away your burdens that lifts your spirits and that reminds you that God is present with you no matter where you are in your journey on down here in your book V ■ Y As You