

Invited To...Liturgy

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[0 : 0 0] So, good morning, everyone. For those of you who don't recognize me, my name is Matt Collinson. I use he and him pronouns. I've been at the evening service for quite a bit over the last few months, but on a beautiful morning like today, who doesn't want to get up and trek in through the snow to see all your wonderful faces?

So, this month we're going through this sermon series, kind of answering the question, what are we invited to as a community at the table? What is it that this church does? What do we stand for as opposed to, as Pastor Anthony alluded to a couple of weeks ago, what are we trying to rescue people from? It is important that the church exists to do that, that we bring people out of these spaces that have been unsafe, have been harmful. But we can't just do that. We have to bring people into a space where we're doing something. What are we for? So, a couple of weeks ago, Pastor Anthony talked about being for spiritual formation, for being for discipleship, creating a place where we can grow together. And last week we talked about worship, what that means to be invited into a space of worship, what it means to be invited into a space where we're engaging with song, we're engaging with each other, and we're engaging with the Spirit. So, this week we're going to talk about being invited into liturgy. We're going to start with communion as sort of an example of liturgy, and then we're going to expand a little bit beyond that. So, let's pray, and then we'll open up Scripture.

Father God, thank you for this space. Thank you for this community of people who come together every week to be in your presence, to be with each other, and to engage in practices that have transcended generations, continents, and countries, to learn more about you and to be in the United States. Amen.

So, I thought, since we're talking about communion, a good place to start today was the original communion. So, there's a couple of accounts of the original communion story, before it was communion, when it was actually the feast of the Passover. So, we're going to take Luke's version, and I'm only going to read a couple of verses from it. So, if you have a device or a physical Bible, if that's your way, we're going to Luke 22, and we're just going to look at verses 19 and 20. As you're pulling that up, I just want to say that these verses come in the context of the Passover meal. Jesus and his disciples are sat around a table.

If you've seen the old joke about Jesus asking for a table for 26, and the waiter looking at him and saying, why is that we're all going to sit on the same side of the table, based on the Da Vinci painting?

[2 : 3 1] So, Jesus is sat with his friends. They're sharing this holy Passover meal that's been passed down for generations through Israel's history. And then towards the end of the meal, he took the bread, and he broke it. And he gave it to his disciples, saying, this is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

And in the same way, after supper, he took the cup and said, this is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. For those of us who've grown up in church, those words are pretty familiar. They roll off our tongues without us even thinking about it.

And again, if we grew up in church, we tend to think of Jesus looking forward to the crucifixion that was coming the next day. Jesus was perhaps talking about his upcoming death. But the reality is that Jesus was talking to a group of people who had no idea what was coming on Good Friday. Jesus was talking to a group of people who had no idea what was in the future. So it's likely that the disciples didn't hear the words through the lens of the crucifixion that we hear them through today. And maybe they were actually looking backwards.

This was the feast of the Passover, a key moment in Jewish history. So maybe, maybe when the disciples heard those words, they were thinking, this is the night of the ancient Passover.

The bread that the Jews ate when they fled from an oppressive regime in Egypt that night was made without yeast. Because they needed to get away so quickly that if you ever made bread, the slowest part about it is letting the yeast rise and create this bread. Back in 2020, when we all got into bread making for those few weeks of the year, the yeast is the slow part. And the people of Israel, God's people, were told, you need to be ready to go at a moment's notice. You can't take partially proved bread with you. You have to be ready to go. So they made this bread without yeast for the journey. This was a moment where God had provided for his people. He provided this bread for his people and said, be ready to go.

[4 : 37] And then when they reached the desert, after they fled the captivity in Egypt, God provided this bread-like substance, this sort of manna that was commemorated as a part of the Passover festival.

So maybe that's what the disciples were thinking about. Maybe when Jesus said, this is my body given for you, they weren't thinking this is a body that is about to be broken. Maybe they were thinking about Jesus literally giving his life as a teacher, as a rabbi, as a leader.

Maybe they were thinking about the time earlier on in his life when Jesus had described himself as the bread of life after just feeding 5,000 people with five loaves of bread. And when he said that anyone who was hungry should come to him and they'll never be hungry again, maybe that's what the disciples were thinking about. This bread, this life that was given for the fulfillment and the nourishment of many. Maybe they were thinking about how he lived his life, this given life of a teacher to stand against empire, to literally walk around the country healing the sick, literally physically feeding the hungry. I think when the disciples heard, this is my body given for you, they thought of a life physically lived, not an impending death. And likewise, after the supper, he took the cup and said, this is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you. Covenants were a sort of familiar concept to the Jewish people.

A covenant in legal parlance is literally an agreement between two people. But the word in Jewish context often meant more of a covenant, a contract, an agreement, a promise between Yahweh and his people, usually sealed with blood. So the first promise, the first covenant that Yahweh made with his people that was reaffirmed the night they fled Egypt on the night of the Passover was essentially, I will be your God and you will be my people. God's people, the Jews, the Israelites, they were told, if you keep God's commands, God will be your protector. God will be your source of life and strength. And the reason that they were so often sealed in blood was that on the night of the Passover, the night that the meal that Jesus celebrated with the disciples commemorated, the people of Israel were told to sacrifice a lamb and put the blood around the doorframe so that the angel of destruction that was coming against the oppressive empire of the Egyptians would literally pass over their house so they would be safe. And this was one of the first examples of if you, my people, follow my commands to put blood on your doorpost, I will be your protector, I will be your God, and I will provide for you.

Jesus, we know, was promising a new covenant. And maybe the disciples heard that. Maybe they thought, okay, we get covenant, we get sort of this Passover meal as a celebration of a covenant sealed in blood.

[7 : 35] But something new is coming. But one of the things that we know about the disciples, if you watch them through the life of Jesus, it can be kind of frustrating as someone who knows the end of the story to read it through and be like, guys, how are you so dense? Like, how do you not see what's coming?

Jesus literally stands up at one point and says, I'm going to be handed over to the Romans, crucified, and then I'll come back to life again three days later. And afterwards, the disciples started arguing about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. It was literally the two phases in that story. The disciples didn't get it. And maybe they were a little dense, but maybe also when someone says, I'm going to be murdered by the state and come back to life three days later, we're like, probably you're not meaning that literally, because that literally doesn't happen.

But they knew Jesus was going to do something. So maybe they thought that night, maybe they thought this new covenant was the start of a revolution. Maybe they thought that that night there was going to be blood that was shed in the overthrowing of the Roman Empire, the freedom of God's people.

Something was coming. They just didn't know what it was. And that's the meal that we commemorate today. These people gathered around a table there with their best friend. He knew what was coming.

They didn't. He was maybe looking forward to predicting this body that was given, literally given, literally broken. This blood shed, literally shed. But the disciples were looking back to stories of when their God had provided for them. Covenants shed in blood that had served for their protection. Overthrowing of empires. But again, literally with the shedding of blood.

[9 : 18] So as we read this story, it's easy to see it in our current context. We know the end of the story. But the people who heard it didn't know the end of the story. So they probably didn't fully understand what was happening. Jesus was starting something new. And it started that night.

And still, 2,000 years later, for all of our differences, for all of the sometimes literally warring limbs on the body of Christ, one of the things that universally unites us is that we come together and commemorate this meal that Jesus first had with his disciples the night before he died.

If you go to any church, not just in this country, but literally anywhere in the world on a Sunday morning, you will likely hear the same invitation. Come to this table. Come and eat.

This is the body of Christ. This is the blood of Christ. You may not know the language. You may not understand what else has happened in the sermon. But even if you can't see or if you can't understand what someone's saying, the physical act of breaking bread is universal. Physical act of raising up this cup is universal.

The taste of the bread, where we put it into our mouths, the swallowing of the wine, it's a universal thing that unites all of the body of Christ across time and across space.

[10 : 39] And there's something really important about continuing in these traditions. I was in Ethiopia a long time ago for a college trip.

And there was this two-hour-long communion service that started at six in the morning because they like sunrise services. It was given in a completely different language. It's a language called Gers, which is only spoken in Ethiopian Orthodox churches.

It's not even the common language of Ethiopia. And for most of the service, it was very unclear what was going on. But there were certain points when you could see the priest breaking the bread, the priest lifting up the cup, the priest physically inviting people to come forward, people taking and receiving why.

It's a universal experience. And the interesting thing about the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, if you're like me and find this sort of thing interesting, the liturgy that they used, the service that they followed, had been the same since about 400 AD.

The same service had been happening in that same building for almost 1600 years. This liturgy that we engage in, this practice that we come to every week, is not something that's been dropped on us in the 21st century.

[11 : 47] It's an enduring tradition that connects us through the history of the church. And I think that's important. It's important that we know that what we do is grounded in something more than just we thought this was a good idea on a Sunday morning.

There's actually a reason why we do this. It's continuation of history. But there's something for me as I was thinking about communion, as I was thinking about this concept of liturgy and what it means to do the work of the people.

That brought back a memory for me of one of the first communions I had in the United States. So a little bit about me. I came to the States in 2013. I still have some of the accent.

I hope you can still hear it. But I came with my ex-wife. And so we got here about 2013. Two years later, in March of 2015, we separated.

I was basically by myself in D.C., which I think is pretty universally known as the loneliest city in the country. It's a common experience for a lot of folks.

[12 : 52] And so I remember thinking, I want to find a community. I want to find a space where, partly where I can sort of get away from the past a little bit, but also where I can be seen and known. A place to feel at home.

So when my ex and I first moved to the States, we sort of looked around churches in D.C. We'd done a little bit of Googling. Like, oh, that might be interesting one day. One of the places that we found was this tiny little new thing called the Tape.

They met on H Street. We lived in Columbia Heights. We were like, that's a long way. We're not going to do that. We don't understand the D.C. transit system yet. And for a wide variety of reasons, we never ended up finding a church or investigating what this table community was.

But for some bizarre reason, I remembered that almost two years later when I was like, where do I go and find a community? So I Googled the table again. I was like, okay, I can figure out H Street. I've lived in D.C. a little bit now.

I know how the metro works. I can make it down to H Street. Can't be that difficult. Funny thing, that week when I was crashing on a friend's couch in Petworth, that very week the table said, you know what, we're going to have two locations.

[14 : 01] One of them is going to be at Logan Circle. It's like, I know Logan Circle. That's literally just down the street from where I'm staying. I can get there. So I did. I went. I found this new little community, sat on, I think the chairs were slightly more comfortable back then.

I don't really remember much of the service. I think there was worship. I couldn't tell you. I don't remember it. I vaguely remember sort of liking the sermon, I think.

I remember who preached it and they're not here, so I can say that and not worry about getting into trouble. But at the end of the sermon, the pastor who was giving the sermon stepped away from the lectern and stood behind a table, a small wooden table.

And he started the communion liturgy. And if you've grown up in the church like I have, the communion liturgy feels very familiar.

It's a rhythm that is very easy to get into. If someone stands up and says, you know, the start of the communion liturgy, you start falling into it. The words start sounding familiar.

[15 : 09] You start feeling a little bit connected. Everyone joins together and says the Lord's Prayer. Everyone knows the Lord's Prayer.

Even if we know slightly different versions, everyone comes together to say it. When the pastor says the peace of the Lord be with you, it's almost reflexive, right?

You can't not do it. So there was something about that moment when, while the rest of the service had perhaps passed me by, I wasn't really super engaged. This drew me in.

But words only get you so far. It's all well and good to listen to some words, repeat some words, just a fraction, sort of out of habit. It's very different to have to get up out of your seat, walk down the central aisle with everybody else walking to communion.

Look someone in the eye as they say to you, this is the body of Christ broken. This is the blood of Christ shed for you. I had to physically go into the church building, but then I had to physically get up and choose to be a part of that communion.

[16 : 10] It was all well and good listening to something familiar, sort of watching something familiar happen. But until I actually stood up, took a piece of bread, dipped it in some wine and ate it, it wasn't real.

It wasn't like coming back to something until you could physically taste it, physically feel it. So that first communion liturgy in March of 2015 in an upper room, literally, of a church on Logan Circle, was what started me back into this community.

And he started, helped me remember that, you know, we always like singing about how Jesus never lets you go, but actually it's true. You just need to step into it first. You can't watch from the sidelines.

So after a while, coming to the church a little more regularly, I actually started listening to the rest of the liturgy, rather than just the bits that felt familiar. And if you listen to the liturgy at the table, there's something that you don't find or you don't hear in every church.

And it goes something a bit like this. It's actually written there. I'm not going to read it directly, but it goes something like this. Here at the table, we practice an open table. We welcome anyone who sees themselves in need of God's grace.

[17 : 23] There's no rules. You don't have to believe a certain thing. You don't have to have completed a certain number of Bible classes. You don't have to sign a statement of faith. You don't have to produce evidence that you're giving to the church in order to come and take communion.

All that we as a community know is that you are here. And by being here, you are welcome to join us at this table. And this open table actually really closely aligns with how the earliest church did that.

The early church was a place where literally everyone was welcome. And it's impossible to get rid of these sort of social distinctions and social hierarchies. But when the early church gathered together for their meals, for their fellowship, everyone sat at the same table.

This was pretty radical. You had enslaved folks and free folks sat at the same table. You had men and women sat at the same table. You had people who had a Jewish history and people who didn't sit at the same table eating the same food.

That was radically inclusive. And if it was radically inclusive 2,000 years ago, it's probably still a little bit radically inclusive today. The church was meant as this place where people could meet God together.

[18 : 37] Be in community together. And where these social hierarchies were set aside. Where everyone came together, eat the same bread, drink the same wine. There wasn't some fancy wine in the corner for the rich folks.

Everyone drank from the same cup. Everyone ate the same bread. The early church had seen Jesus' ministry. How he came and literally said multiple times, I've come here to upend your silly little hierarchies.

And one way that the early church lived this out was by practicing this radically open table that we have here at the table today. And for those of you who know a little bit of the church's history, the reason that we chose the name or the reason the name of the table was chosen was partly to represent this communion table.

The table represents both the meals that we share around dinner tables, around coffee tables, around tables at a bar. But it also points to this communion table. We're all invited into this place together and this table is sort of the central event.

One of the problems with being an institution is that while we say this is an open table, this is a welcoming table, we haven't always lived up to that. There's a bit of church history there that we can get into another time.

[19 : 59] If you want to know more about it, there are folks who can talk about it. But the reality is that the church has not lived up to this promise. We've said this is a radically open table and then we've shut people out. We've not let people bring their whole selves into the space.

We want to be a space that actually invites everyone in. We want to live out this vision that embodies a gospel and announces collective liberation for everyone. That means everyone is welcome at the table.

And so part of that is to try and keep getting better at welcoming people to this physical space. To remind us to actually embody this collective liberation.

This radical friendship can't be something that you do just sort of sitting looking at each other. It's actually have to engage physically. You have to be in the same space. You have to share things together. And one way we embody this is by welcoming everyone to this same table.

And everyone gets welcomed in the same way. Again, there's no hierarchies here. You don't get to jump the line if you give more to the church. You don't have to wait at the back if you haven't been for the last few weeks. Everyone gets the same size bread.

[21 : 11] Everyone gets the same amount of the cup. Everyone is equally in need of it. And everyone equally gets it. And that's a really powerful physical way of demonstrating God's grace for us.

God's grace is not something that we can put limits on. We don't get to stop people and say, no, sorry, that's too much of God's grace. You can't have any more today. God's grace is given to all of us.

And one way that we can sort of physically embody that is the ability to give and receive these tangible elements as a grace, as an example of the grace of God.

This open communion table embodying that God's love is welcoming and open to all. And one way that we can think about that is if you look at the book of James, there's a very famous verse there, which is often misused.

And again, that's a whole other sermon that we're not going to get into. But James warns us that a faith without works is dead. And theologians have constantly been warning us throughout history that our faith can't just live in our heads.

[22 : 18] It's not just an intellectual pursuit, which is deeply annoying to some of us here in D.C. because we really like intellectual pursuits. The better of actually doing something is bothersome to most of us. But faith can't be an intellectual pursuit.

It doesn't live in our heads. It's not the right set of thoughts or beliefs. It's not the right ideas that we have about the world. Faith needs to be acted. This might seem sort of very obvious, but I can stand here and I can say, this bread, this here is for all of you.

You can believe that all you want. But it doesn't actually become real until someone breaks it and gives it to you. We can't intellectualize following Jesus.

We have to actively do it. The clue is in the word follow. It's not a passive. It's not an intellectual idea. It's an active engagement. And the reason that this physical embodiment is so important, the reason that this sort of, it can't all be intellectual, is actually demonstrated by Jesus himself.

So after he'd been crucified and resurrected, which obviously no one fully understood was going to happen. He meets two of his disciples walking down the road to a town called Emmaus.

[23 : 32] They were leaving Jerusalem. And Jesus comes alongside them. They don't recognize him at all. And he asks them, why are you all so sad? And they say, don't you know that our teacher's been crucified?

And he says, no, tell me more. And then the scripture says he explained the prophecies. He opened up scripture to them and explained who he was in that context.

And they didn't get it. They'd heard all of the right words. They'd heard all of the things they needed to know for this to make sense. And then when they got to the destination, Jesus appeared like he was going to keep going on past them.

And they said, no, come on in. We're going to have a meal. And they sat around this table. And Jesus picked up a loaf of bread. And he broke it. And in that moment, they recognized who he was.

Even Jesus' own words could not convince his own disciples that he was the resurrected Messiah. He picked up a piece of bread, broke it, and gave it to them.

[24 : 35] And they saw it and believed it. So Jesus living out this action, this active faith, brings us back to this concept of liturgy.

You've heard it said a couple of times that the word liturgy actually literally translates as the work people do or the work of the people. So liturgy, this communion table, is not just an invitation to come and share a meal together, as important as that is.

To be joined to the body of Christ across continents, across history, as important as that is. It's a physical, embodied act. You can take away all the words.

The physical act of eating the bread and the wine is what's important. So this physical, tangible, sort of active remembering of Jesus' life and death and resurrection invites us in to reflect not just on our own beliefs, but on our actions.

We're forced to stand up and walk towards this table. And as we do that, let's think about what our actions are. Because we're called to stand, to move towards receiving the bread and the wine.

[25 : 47] Let's think about who are we called to stand with? Who are we called to stand up for? What are the places where injustice is happening, where we need to stand on the right side of history?

Let's think about when we stand up before we come forward. Who are we called to stand with? Who are we standing with? And as we walk towards the table, look around.

Who are you walking alongside? Who are you walking with? When you think of those people that you were called to stand up for, look around you. You're not standing alone. Walking down together shows us who we're walking alongside.

It also asks us who should we be walking with? Whose path do we need to join? We can't do this alone. Liturgy is not the work of the person. It is the work of the people.

We are in this together. So as we walk down, remember who we're walking with and think about who we're called to walk beside. And as we physically eat a meal together, remember that Jesus' message was that we're all in need of renewal.

[26 : 58] And no one's above others. That the grace of God is offered to all, needed by all, and received by all. Jesus came to upend social hierarchies. Eating a meal together like this of simple food reminds us that we're all together.

Jesus humbled the powerful and elevated those society ignored. Jesus reminds us that there is no status, wealth, or power that will prevail against renewal and liberation.

Eating this communion reminds us that we all have basic needs. And asks us to think, who's not getting their basic needs met?

What barriers or gatekeeping is going on to prevent people having their basic needs met? And without being dramatic, remember that Jesus, by standing for those things in his life, literally had his body broken and his blood spilled.

So this liturgy of communion, this work of the people, reminds us physically that we're welcome to Jesus' great feast.

[28 : 00] We didn't really talk about this, but remember that the person sat next to Jesus at the first communion went on to betray him. Jesus had no gate. Everyone is welcome at this table, and everyone is called into this work that Jesus asks us to do, to embody this radically inclusive, liberative space, welcoming all as equals to the same table.

Liturgy calls us into an active expression of faith, to embody what we believe, to remember the life and work of Jesus, and our call to imitate, physically imitate, our teacher in how we live our lives.

So I want to close with a question. Everyone is welcome to Jesus' great feast. How do our lives embody that truth? Let's pray.

Jesus, as we think of the sacrifice that you made for us, the things that you called for, the things that you asked of your people, help us to leave here today and thinking about how we can embody, how we can physically imitate the work that you did in our community.

Amen.