

AT THE TABLE OF JESUS

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch
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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 26:20-30, John 13:34-35, I John 4:7-11 (?)

Steven Ferris tells the story about a young pastor who arrived at his first church. He went into the kitchen on Saturday night to prepare the elements for Sunday morning communion. He cut the loaf of bread into bite sized pieces. But then, he couldn't find any grape juice. So, he rummaged through the cupboard until he found a can of grape powder. He assumed that this was what the congregation used either by choice or financial necessity. So, he mixed a pitcher full and tasted it and found it tasted pretty good -- so he poured the juice into the tray of little cups. He then put the lids on the trays of bread and juice – and then put the trays into the refrigerator for the night.

The next morning, the assigned Deacon got the trays out of the fridge and put them on the communion table before worship. Then, during worship, the new minister moved to the communion table and gave his meditation – shared the words of institution and the elders

prayed – and then the deacons carried the trays to the congregation.

The minister then sat down behind the table and bowed his head in prayer. After a while, he stole a glance at the congregation and was stunned to find everyone including the deacons with the trays looking at him. The cups were filled with grape Jello!!!¹

Now, I'm not sure what happened next – but I hope there was some laughter and joy – and that the church truly felt the presence of the risen Christ at the table of the Lord that day. For Christ can meet us in surprising and extraordinary ways – in the midst of the ordinariness of the bread and the cup – and move in us to share His love and grace with others.

Today we begin a new sermon series called: “From Bread and Wine to Faith and Generosity”. Throughout these next four weeks, we will discover how Jesus meets us around tables – to share with us God's love and to call us to share God's love with others. We'll see how God's giving inspires and empowers our own giving.

The Lord's Supper is vital to our faith as Christians and is a central part of every worship service in the Christian Church (Disciples of

Christ). We celebrate transformation every time we gather around the Lord's Table. Bread and wine - become in a very special and symbolic way: the very presence of Jesus. We come to the table every Sunday to nourished and strengthened for the coming week, filled up with the assurance of God's love and presence. You might say that the table of the Lord is a Giving Table – a place where gifts are given and lives are transformed. We *receive* the gifts of communion and love from God – and we in turn, are enabled to *give* gifts of love. Those offerings of money that we place upon the table are also transformed by God's love – changed into acts of ministry and mission.

We can read about that very first Lord's Supper, when Jesus gathered in the upper room with His disciples throughout the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But today, we are going to look at Paul's teaching about communion and how we can perhaps gain a deeper meaning for our time around the table.

Turn with me to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the 11th chapter. Let's read verses 23-29:

²³ For I pass on to you what I received from the Lord himself. On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread ²⁴ and gave

thanks to God for it. Then he broke it in pieces and said, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ *In the same way, he took the cup of wine after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant between God and his people—an agreement confirmed with my blood. Do this in remembrance of me as often as you drink it.”* ²⁶ *For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord’s death until he comes again.*

²⁷ *So anyone who eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily is guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.* ²⁸ *That is why you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup.* ²⁹ *For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God’s judgment upon yourself.*

These words are so very common and familiar to us – as we hear them spoken at the Lord’s Table almost every Sunday. But let’s take just a few moments to reflect closer at these words and learn 6 ways we can enter more fully into the Lord’s Supper and be transformed as we partake of the bread and the cup.

First, we are called to **LOOK BACK & REMEMBER**. In the Upper Room, when Jesus first shared this meal with his disciples, he gave them the bread and said **in verse 24** “Do this *in remembrance of me*.” He said the same thing when he gave the cup. “*Remember me*.” Whenever we celebrate this meal we are to look back and remember what Jesus has done for us.

During communion, I often find myself envisioning Jesus, hanging on the cross, dying for our sins. I try, in my mind's eye and heart, to look into His eyes and hear Him saying, *"Father, forgive them."*

"Remember, I did this for you – because I love you." And my response is great gratitude as I remember what Jesus did for me.

When we gather at the Lord's table, we LOOK BACK, in remembrance and gratitude.

And then, we LOOK WITHIN. Verse 28 tells us that we need to examine ourselves before we eat of the bread and the cup. Well, I believe it means that we need to take stock of ourselves – and reflect on where we stand and how we are doing in our relationship with God. It is time for us to confess our sins, "I'm sorry, Lord. I know I have betrayed you – or denied you – or fallen away." The Lord's Supper is for sinners who see their need for the grace and mercy of God. If you see your need for God's mercy today, then come.

We look back; we look within. And then we LOOK AROUND. Verse 29 tells us to be careful to honor and discern the body of Christ. Well, the body of Christ is the church – our brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are to look around and see how we are doing in our relationships with others. How are we getting along with each other? Do we have some unresolved conflicts? There were problems in the Corinthian church. There were different factions, so Paul challenged them to focus on repairing their relationships with each other. One of the names for this meal is communion. It is a meal that shows our union with each other, our unity.

So, **look around**. Are there people in your life that you need to love and forgive?

I still remember growing up in the church, what my mother frequently said to my brothers after worship. Invariably it seemed like the two of them would get into some spat for argument and my mother would say to them, "I don't know what good it did for you all to go to church today and have communion, because you haven't changed and you aren't treating each other any better." Our time of worship and communing with our Lord should make a difference in the way we live and in the way that we show love and forgiveness to others. Make time

to look around and show God's love to your brothers and sisters in Christ.

And then **LOOK OUTSIDE**. Look outside the church, to those who do not know Jesus, to those who have never heard the good news. In **verse 26 Paul** says that “*whenever we eat this bread and drink the cup, [we] proclaim the Lord’s death.*” But what does that exactly mean?

Well, the Greek word for proclaim, means messenger. We are God’s messengers. We are messengers of the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ. We are messengers of good news to a world that desperately needs good news. We are to look outside the church and tell the world of God’s love in Jesus Christ. Just as God has been so generous and loving to us – we are to be generous in our giving and in our loving with others.

Look back. Look within. Look around and look out. And then **LOOK forward**. In verse 26 Paul tells us that when we celebrate this meal we proclaim the Lord’s death “*until he comes.*” We believe that at some point Jesus will come back to earth. This meal reminds us of that time. The Lord’s Supper looks forward, with a sense of anticipation and

hope for the future. No matter how bad things get in the present, our belief in the second coming brings us hope that the future will be better. The Lord's Supper reminds us of that hope.

And then just one more direction – **LOOK UP!** Look up to the love and mercy of Christ! There have been many times as I have bowed my head in prayer during communion – and have confessed my sins – that I have heard what I perceive is the voice of Jesus say to me, “Look up! Look at me – and see the love in my eyes for you! Know my grace and mercy – feel my comfort and healing – and know my peace that passes all understanding. That is the gift of communion with our Lord!

Jesus is calling! He wants to have communion with you! He is saying: “Come just as you are. Come and receive my love. Come and live forever. Life everlasting. Strength for today and hope for tomorrow. Come eat the bread and be filled – come taste the living water and never thirst again!”

Just as you saw seven youth make their confessions of faith earlier and receive the cleansing of their sins in the waters of baptism – you too are invited to make that great confession today! Come – and make a

decision for Jesus to be your Lord and Savior and live for Him. The Savior is waiting for you to come. Won't you answer His call today? Come now, just as you are – come and answer the Spirit's call.

RESOURCES

¹Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. *Re/Membering, Meditations and Sermons for the Table of Jesus Christ*. Chalice Press, 1996. Page 149.

A small country church in Wisconsin has a special tradition that they have used at the close of their communion services for a number of years. It is adapted from an ancient Jewish closing of the Passover meal. Since it is the hope of every devout Jew to celebrate the Passover at least once in David's city, the Jewish custom is to end the meal with a toast. Passover participants raise the cup and say, "Next year, in Jerusalem!"

The cup in the Lord's Supper serves as two reminders: we are to look back to the shed blood of Christ and forward to the Lord's second coming. In other words, for all Christians, there will be a last sharing of the bread and the cup on this side of eternity: when they meet once again, they will be in Christ's presence. At the close of communion, the members of this church raise their cups in anticipation and say, "Next time, with Christ!"