

"Free to Be: A People Who Break Bread Together"

Second of Two Baptist Ordinances: "The Lord's Supper"

Seventh Sermon in the 14-week summer series: *Free to Be*

Jn 6:35, Mt. 26:26-35, Lk 22:14-20, Lk 24:30-31

Acts 2:42, 46-47, 1 Cor 10: 16-17, 1 Cor 11:23-26

NRSV

Reflect upon your very first communion or at least your early experience with communion. Was it one of comfort or was it more awkward? Was it a meal of judgement or a meal of grace? Was it hyper-individualized, or equally about you *and* community? Was the focus more on the death of Jesus, or his living reminder? Was it more about the hereafter, or the here and now?

I admit I cannot remember specifically when I had my very first communion, but I do think it was after I was Baptized, or maybe it was before that since I don't quite recall. There was sort of an unwritten understanding that one would perhaps receive communion after they had been baptized. This is what many churches practice, a with some understandable reasoning, but as of now, here at Calvary Baptist Church of Denver, we acknowledge that one may receive communion before Baptism, or after. However one feels

led. I love what Rev. Nadia Bolz Weber says this about this order of Baptism First, and then communion: She says, "If only grace happens in a certain order."¹

Let's begin by exploring the difference between a sacrament and an ordinance, and some of the many understandings around communion from varying traditions. We can better honor our value of Baptist freedoms by learning from other traditions.

A sacrament is seen as a means of salvation, receiving a divine blessing for eternal life, and, a sacrament is understood as an act of forgiveness known as sanctification. On the other hand, ordinance, as Baptists call it, is more of a symbolic practice, and a testimony of faith.² We ritualize the The Lord's Supper because Jesus commanded it. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me," perhaps teaching us something new, every time we

¹ <https://thecomers.substack.com/p/on-communion>

² <https://www.challies.com/articles/baptism-sacrament-or-ordinance/>

remember and partake in this very central event in the life of the Church.

One of the key elements in understanding The Lord's Supper through the lens of Baptist theology is that it is rooted in community practice. It's about our shared experiences, in connection with the biblical stories. As Baptists, we acknowledge that practices in one setting will have different meanings and interpretations in another setting. It is reflective of our ecumenical and interfaith context. A Baptist liturgical theology is more conversational than it is authoritative in tone. Less about a conveyed power, and more about a remembrance ritual.

Being Baptist recognizes that the community of worship experiences in rituals are human, and sometimes messy as they are also transcendental. Sometimes funny things happen during baptism, sometimes accommodations are made, sometimes words are stumbled or forgotten, little plastic cups are dropped in that quiet pause after we drink together.

And just think about the ways we creatively experienced the Lord's Supper during the pandemic while we are in quarantine. In our homes, we used Oreos and Capri Suns, or coffee and goldfish crackers, or maybe you actually poured yourself a glass of wine! None of these things take away

from the life giving truths about The Lord's Supper. We as Baptists, honor the way the Spirit moves, and we trust the way the mystery of Christ shows up in surprising ways.

Several meanings have been attributed to this ritual. In the middle ages, the church taught that the bread and wine miraculously changed into the body and blood... of Jesus. Medieval theologians created a doctrine to explain this called *transubstantiation*, meaning change of substance. Protestant reformers did not agree on how the presence of Christ was part of the elements, and the meaning of *consubstantiation* grew out of this disagreement, and it means that the bread and wine co-exist with the body and blood, C-O-N: with.³ For Baptists The Lord's Supper is symbolic. There's more of an emphasis on the life and teachings of Jesus and the implications this has for our lives, as opposed to a focus on what God is doing to a divinely ordained substance. And in the same way Baptism is a very public act for Baptists, so is communion. We see the faces of each other coming to the table, we serve one another, we remember and grow in faith as a community.

There is a lot of nuance and overlap in these distinctions. But Baptists believe that the ordinances of baptism and communion are living rituals with

³ Geering, L. 2003 "Holy Communion" in *The Fourth R Issue Index*, Vol. 16, 4, 3-6.

multiple perspectives and multiple entry points, and while we do believe God is present, it is in a symbolic, metaphorical, and meaningful way. But if you struggle to determine exactly what it is in one way or the other, perhaps the way Celtic teacher, John Philip Newell describes the sacred can help us embrace the mystery and reality of the ordinances when he describes the sacred as, "...present on earth as it is in heaven, as immanent as it is transcendent, as human as it is divine, as physical as it is spiritual. The sacred can be breathed in, tasted, touched, heard, and seen as much in the body of the earth and the body of another living being as in the body of religion. It is the true essence of all life."⁴

Some of you may have felt troubled and turned off by your early communion experiences. Maybe communion's sole purpose was for you to get "right with God" in ways that overshadowed Jesus' invitation to the table seeing us all as Beloved. Maybe you're a bit squeamish about this body and blood thing, or perhaps you're troubled by a heavy emphasis on a violent atonement theology that might no longer fit well with your growing theological construction. If this is the case, you are not alone. The shadow of

the 4th century formulated Western Imperial church theology is still dominating much of the Western Christian traditions. If we are sharing food with one another in communion, perhaps we shouldn't view the Lord's Supper as a distribution of some kind of commodity in exchange for something we need to do or be. We Baptists are not a creedal people. A doctrinal approach has in some ways given the impression that truth is only provided from above, or from those in power, instead of also revealed within us- remember Pastor Anne's reminder in her sermon about Bible freedom: "... We say, not as a creed, but as an affirmation and celebration for how God speaks into our lives and throughout the world today: the Word of God in scripture, the Word of God among us, the Word of God within us."⁵ Thanks be to God that Communion ritualizes this truth! Within us-How liberating to know that we have a voice- and that perhaps more significantly, the marginalized have a voice. That is the heart of the gospel message we see playing out in the ordinance of communion- that the earth and all her creatures, and every human being is sacred. This doesn't mean this meal isn't also about forgiveness, or that it is not a reminder of the redemptive endeavor of Jesus- it is. But

⁴ <https://www.earthandsoul.org>

⁵ Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro, "Free to Be: A Non-Creedal People Who Interpret Scripture for Ourselves and With One Another" Sermon preached at Calvary Baptist Church of Denver, CO, June 20, 2021.

maybe you long for a meal that counters a traumatic and violent power, a meal that has an intentional practice of nonviolent solidarity, and reconciliation. A meal that celebrates in spite of violence that happened then by the empire, and in spite of violence that continues to happen today in similar ways. A meal that allows us to grieve and to be transformed, but that also recognizes the resilient nature of Jesus, and community.⁶

I love what we can learn from the different names given to this ritual. Eucharist used in the Catholic and Anglican traditions, is from the Greek *eukharistia* meaning thanksgiving.⁷ The Agape Love Feast- Agape from the new testament greek points us to the early christian meals of mutual sharing and unity. These meals in the early Christian communities, and in the ways Jesus shared meals is quite significant in how we as Baptists draw meaning from this ordinance. I'll circle back to that...And Communion, from the latin word *communio*(*yo*)- common.⁸ Communion sustains us as individuals, but also as a community. And: The Lord's Supper: a reflection of Jesus instruction to "Do this in remembrance of me" comes from this morning's scripture readings where we see that Luke and Paul added the language of

remembrance and covenant. A lot of the Baptist focus is on remembrance, as in, to be mindful, to remember who we are in Jesus' eyes, *and* to remember our calling in the world. Breaking down the word remember into re and member- we are reminded of the ways in which we come to be restored, individually, and in the broader community. We come to be reminded of our belonging, and belonging is a powerful healing reality, which leads into the next important piece about Baptist Identity in Communion, and that is the concept of the Open Table.

An open table invites us to a table of abundance, not scarcity. There are traditions who practice a closed table, including some Baptist churches. Our initial response might be one of reluctance and even judgment around that. But in the spirit of freedom of religion, while we may disagree, we can respect why certain traditions practice a closed table communion. Here at Calvary, we have a strong open table theology. You may often hear from those presiding over the table, "Come not because you must, but because you may." And you can hear the difference between a language of expectation in "must" compared to the word "may" as in a welcoming invitation.

⁶ Grundy, Christopher. *Recovering Communion in a Violent World: Resistance, Resilience, and Risk*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019.

⁷ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/eucharist>

⁸ *Ibid*

This is the Lord's table, not ours. If this is the Lord's table, it would behoove us to draw meaning about this ritual through the lens of Jesus, much in the same way we approach scripture.

At Calvary, we leave the decision up to parents/guardians whether or not they want their children to receive the elements, with respect for whatever they deem best. It came naturally for John and I as parents, to allow our children's curiosity to lead the way as to when they wanted to partake. And then we addressed questions and explanations at their level. For me, and as a Baptist who practices this ordinance through the lens of Jesus' example, I recall Jesus saying, "Let the little children come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" and I recall in Isaiah, "...and a little child shall lead them." I think including children at the table is a precious part of the open table theology.

We can learn from children's experiences of communion as well. For example, I recall one time when my son Nathan was about 5 years old, he noticed the communion table we have in our sanctuary, while waiting in line to receive communion by intinction. He said, bright eyed and observantly, "Mom, look at all the 'Jesuses' eating together!" Now it is easy for a child to look at Jesus and his disciples in that imagery and simply see Jesus in all of them. But isn't that what we are all called to do, too? To see the face of

Jesus in others? Those disciples who often didn't comprehend Jesus' teachings, who betrayed Jesus, who fell asleep behind Jesus- well, they were all at the table still reflecting faces of belonging.

There is a seat for everyone at the Lord's Table: the rich, the poor, the child the elder, the happy and the depressed, the doubters, and the assured, those who are struggling with mistakes they've made, and those who are celebrating milestones, the visitor and the long time member; the person who benefits from the dominance of empire, and systemic corruption, and the person who is ready to speak up about it. Yes, that mattered to Jesus in his life, and it matters now. Who do we share our meals with?

Another example from a different meal with Jesus: The feeding of the 5 thousand. None of these people were asked by Jesus whether they had met certain requirements. Jesus.simply.fed.them. And there was enough.

Or think about the story in Luke about the Road to Emmaus and how Jesus made himself known in the breaking of the bread- that sense of Belonging. So we are invited to bring our whole selves to this table. All of us. The good and the bad. Wherever you are in this life on earth, you are a guest, and you, and all that you are, are an *honored* guest at this table.

More thoughts about community:
Notice the ways in which we pass the plate in the pews in a manner that requires us to serve one another, and to be served by each other, not just someone in power. It is reciprocal and conversational. In an equal way, we wait to eat and drink together with those who are presiding. Now we may be one of the few Baptist churches who also occasionally receive communion by intinction, where we don't eat at the same time, but again, in Baptist fashion, Baptists don't require servers to be ordained, so intinction includes multiple servers. Also during intinction, we experience a visual of community when we walk down the aisle and return to our pews. A smile is shared, or a hand touches the shoulder of another as one passes by. We are encouraged no matter the way we are sharing communion to say to one another, to say each other's names, (the bread and the cup for you _____) to make this a personal experience *and* an acknowledgment of the "Jesuses" among us. What intimacy.

Professor Jennifer W. Davidson who taught at the American Baptist Seminary of the West for 12 years, breaks down communion in the following 7 descriptors: Welcoming, Embodying, Sustaining, Connecting, Hoping, Remembering, and Sending.⁹

These categories reflect further the ways in which Jesus shared meals in the stories we read about him.

Welcoming: Would you welcome eating with the likes of those Jesus ate with? Partaking in communion alongside awareness of who *Jesus* healed, and who he shared meals with, reveals his welcoming presence. Jesus had a non-discriminatory invitation, by upending religious, cultural, and political systems in order to reveal concern for the marginalized. All are welcome, as described in Calvary's welcome statement: "Welcoming and affirming of all people as children of God from every cultural and religious background, sexual orientation, family composition, physical and mental ability, economic means, race, age, and gender."¹⁰ And that includes here, at this open table. And remember during the Last Supper, Jesus shared bread with his beloved friends, but also with: one who would betray him, one who would deny him. In other words, you don't need to be perfect. Jesus simply fed, and Jesus simply feeds. We are all welcome.

Embodying: The bread and the cup remind us of how the mission of Christ lives in us. We ought to leave the table a changed people. We become the body of Christ, we embody Christ. Womanist

⁹ Davidson, Jennifer W. *River of Life, Feast of Grace: Baptism, Communion, and Discipleship*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2019.

¹⁰ <https://calvarydenver.org>

Theologian M. Shawn Copeland calls this “Eucharistic solidarity”. She says, “embodying Christ is discipleship, and discipleship is embodied praxis-eucharistic solidarity challenges us in living out the implications and demands of discipleship.”¹¹ Eating the bread, and drinking the juice then is not merely a privatized way to be made right with God, but it is a communal invitation to live with radical love.

Sustaining: Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” God seeks to nourish us. As much as we need food to live physically, we need Jesus to live spiritually. This meal is a reminder of God’s promise- the Covenant, that God will sustain us on this journey.

Connecting: The Lord’s Supper lacks authenticity when there are still others who hunger. While it reminds us that we are enough, it reminds us of our role in creating the Beloved Community. M. Shawn Copeland describes, “the table of communion is a place where we grasp the enormity of suffering, affliction, and oppression as well as apprehend our complicity in the suffering, affliction, and oppression of others.”¹² To better understand the concept of complicity, we can go back to the this passage in 1 Corinthians- right before the verses read this

morning, where Paul speaks to the injustice of the prosperous, who failed to make any connection between their worship and the poverty occurring in their midst. The Corinthians’ indifference to the needs of others stands as a clear reminder of the danger of separating the body of Christ “that is for you” in v. 24, from the body of Christ that is the living community of faith where the hungry are fed, the sick visited, the lonely lifted, and the poor provided for.¹³

Hoping: There is hope in knowing that when we bring our whole lives, just as Jesus brought his entire life, when our hearts are broken open, and our lives poured out in Covenant with God and with one another, we are transformed and inspired to become aware of our participation in Christs’ saving and healing presence in hopeful connection and solidarity. In this ritual, we are participants in the story. The hope is not only in Jesus, in remembrance of his sacrifice, death, and resurrection but it is also in us; in the acts we play out here at the Lord’s Table, and in all of the “tables” of our lives. Hope. Take and eat.

Remembering: Communion has often been very individually focused. But communion was intended to empower

¹¹ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009

¹² *Ibid*

¹³ Bartlett, David L. & Taylor, Barbara Brown, et al. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A Volume 2*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

us to stand, and resist any effort to tear communities apart. Jesus was confronting these very kinds of forces near the time he shared his last meal. So in a symbolic way, he gave himself to his followers- and they re-membered the body of christ- he formed community through his offering and blessing and feeding, to counter the death he knew was to come.¹⁴ Just think of the implications in that understanding, and what that means for us.

Sending: These practices, aren't meant to keep you in one place. After you eat a meal, you get up from the table and go elsewhere. Mary Oliver said, "Something happened to the bread and the wine. They have been blessed. Now what?" (The word practice comes from the Greek word, *praktikos* meaning practical, or "concerned with action"¹⁵ As we can see in today's scripture, the word "given" is being used. "He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them." "This is my body, which is given for you." "After blessing it, he broke it, gave it to the disciples" If we are being given the body of Jesus again and again, then we are all part of this incessant incarnation. We are blessed, and we are called to go out into the world as fed people, to feed others.

There is so much to unpack and explore with the ordinance of Communion. That's what I love about the Baptist way in the freedom we have to *responsibly* explore, and question, and think about, and be mystified by- the sacred text, the ordinances we embody, and the missions we hold dear. If you have ever been told you don't belong or, you're not welcome here, You're not good enough, whatever "not enough" was told to you, or implied to you, come to this table to dispel those lies. May you be nourished and guided in ways that fulfill Jesus' desire for you to be fully seen, in all that you are, and to get up from the table growing the same desire of Jesus: to work for love, peace, and justice to prevail...

To conclude: I want to share a poem, by one of my favorite artist theologians, Jan Richardson called, "And the Table Will be Wide" It sums up the meaning of the Lord's Supper so beautifully:

*And the table
will be wide.
And the welcome
will be wide.
And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts*

¹⁴ Davidson, Jennifer W. *River of Life, Feast of Grace: Baptism, Communion, and Discipleship*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2019.

¹⁵ Gallagher, Nora. *The Sacred Meal*. Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2009.

*will open wide
to receive.
And we will come
as children who trust
there is enough.
And we will come
unhindered and free.
And our aching
will be met
with bread.
And our sorrow
will be met
with wine.
And we will open our hands
to the feast
without shame.
And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.
And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.
And we will taste
and know
of delight.
And we will become bread
for a hungry world.
And we will become drink
for those who thirst.
And the blessed
will become the blessing.
And everywhere
will be the feast.¹⁶*

Amen

¹⁶ <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/09/30/and-the-table-will-be-wide/>

Notes:

- I mostly choose to use the word “given” instead of “broken” when presiding over the elements. I do this because I see this experience as a gift of grace, freely provided with no requirements. From a biblical perspective, this is accurate. And I intend to help us focus on the ways in which this meal sustains us and invites us to nourish others, too. However, the world “broken” can also be used in meaningful ways, albeit less biblically accurate. Jesus breaks the bread, and Jesus’ body was broken (wounded on the cross). Furthermore, we can relate to the wounds Jesus experienced. We endure hardships and often feel “broken” in our own ways, in our grief, our pain, even our very bodies. And so, in the spirit of Baptist freedom, language can be an essential part of the unique ways we ritualize and share this sacred meal, and how we use scripture and meaningful language woven into it.
- A note on Atonement Theology: The word “sacrifice” comes from the latin phrase, “*sacrum facere*” which means to “make sacred”. Jesus’ death made human life sacred in the face of violence and injustice.¹⁷
- Unless indicated, all Bible quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*. Harrelson, Walter J., et al. *New Interpreter’s Study Bible*, NRSV with the Apocrypha. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003.
- My draft of the sermon was 15 pages! SO much to say. I cut out a lot, but wanted to mention the chapter (21) on the Open Table from Rachel Held Evans’ book, *Searching For Sunday* where she concludes with, “The Church is God saying, ‘I’m throwing a banquet, and all these mismatched, messed-up people are invited. Here, have some wine.’”¹⁸ The whole chapter is wonderful.
- “You are loved, someone said. Take that and eat it.” -Mary Karr
- **On display on the communion table this morning:**
 - Paten purchased in Tabgha, Israel on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee at the The Church of the Multiplication.
 - “You are Loved” Canvas Print created by Illuminated Ministry. <https://store.illustratedministry.com/products/you-are-loved-jesus-canvas-print>
 - Painting, “The Best Supper” by artist, Jan Richardson <http://www.janrichardsonimages.com/details.php?gid=61&pid=138>

¹⁷ Bartlett, David L. & Taylor, Barbara Brown, et al. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A Volume 2*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

¹⁸ Held Evans, Rachel. *Searching For Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*. Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015.