

The Communion of the Body of Christ

Jesus said, "I am the bread of life."

I know that many of you come from church backgrounds in which communion is part of worship. Though I was baptized in a church which **does** have communion, I cannot remember anything about it.

At some point I heard "communion" was something Catholics did. Actually I didn't even know what a Catholic was. But I do remember some "Catholic" girls, who lived next door who got to wear a kind of lacey thing on their heads and I wanted one because they were pretty.

One thing I did know a little about was something called *The Last Supper*. But, again, I did not know about people commemorating it or celebrating it. In my foggy memory it was a Bible story in Sunday School that told about Jesus getting together with his disciples and having a final meal with them

I finally learned that this was a meal at which Jesus told his disciples to remember him by eating a certain type of bread and drinking wine together. And that this was to "seal the deal" so to speak. The deal was that they promised to love one another as he had loved them. I still did not really get the significance.

As a teenager, the church I was attending taught that only certain chosen persons could partake of the bread and wine and that the commemoration of *The Last Supper* is only once a year—specifically the date Nissan 13 on the Jewish calendar. Based on this teaching I knew that I did not fit the qualifications to partake—so I just attended the somber service of remembrance.

So, in 2002, when I attended my first worship service in the Episcopal Church I had no idea what communion was all about. Bringing the teachings from my teen years with me I did not partake.

It was not until 2004 after having poured over the scriptures in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; and looking again and again for (the what was supposed to be done), (the when it was supposed to be done), (the why it was supposed to be done), and (the who was supposed to do it), that I realized I could finally partake! And not only that I could, but also that I must.

Here is what I came to understand:

In our reading from John this morning, Jesus is not at the last supper—he has just come from what I am calling the "*first supper*".

It is the day after 5000 people sat on grass eating and listening to Jesus. Crowded around Jesus, they were unaware of the true miracle that had happened that day.

John writes that the people were looking for Jesus because he provided them with a meal. And though that was true, there was, as always seems to be the case with Jesus, a hidden lesson.

Jesus was teaching them about how to be community. For a few hours all those people were in unity with one another. Did you catch that? They became community because they were in unity.

This is what was awakened in me as I began to come forward each week to receive the body and blood of Christ.

It does not take an etymologist to know that the words communion and community go together. They denote fellowship in an intimate way—sharing—participating with.

In the front of the blue hymnal #s S151-S172 are what is called Fraction Anthems. It is what is sung after the bread and wine are blessed but before distribution. For me S171 is particularly meaningful. It is the one I was assigned to solo when I was in seminary.

The words say all that needs to be said about what communion really is:

Be known to us; Lord Jesus, in the breaking of the bread.

The bread which we break, alleluia, is the communion of the body of Christ.

Be known to us Lord Jesus, in the breaking of the bread.

One body are we alleluia for though many we share one bread.

Be known to us Lord Jesus, in the breaking of the bread.

The bread is more than a remembrance of the body of Jesus broken on the cross. It is the uniting of what Fr. Rob spoke of last week: of all that was and is.

It is us

**communing with those who have gone before in centuries past and even recently,

**communing with those who live in far off lands

**communing with those who live near

**communing with one another right here in this room

It is all the many parts of the body of Christ; broken, yes; bleeding yes; and yet united by the love that is at once shared in that moment.

That is, Christ who is the bread of life that gives us wholeness, feeds us, nourishes us, fortifies us, through us.

Hard as it is sometimes, I am so grateful that I get to be on The Diocesan Board of Trustees because of the very spiritual nature of it. The Board reads and discusses one book each year. This year we are reading The Amen Effect written by *Rabbi Sharon Brous*.

Though she is Jewish, in her book she gives examples of how we in 2024 can be that love that brings wholeness to the broken body of Christ through communion—the communion of the “body” of Christ.

In this book, I was particularly struck by her modern application of a pilgrimage ritual from ancient Jerusalem in which the pilgrims would enter the Temple Courtyard turning

to the right and circling around the complex back to the same entrance. If a pilgrim was suffering in some way they would use the same entrance but instead turn to the left circling the complex in the opposite direction. Those circling from the right would see the suffering person, ask what the trouble was, and speak a word of comfort. She mentioned all forms of pain and trouble that humans suffer.

Reading this, I pictured Us as we walk forward to receive Christ's body and blood during worship. What pain or trouble is walking up this aisle. And how are we responding to it?

I pictured our baptismal covenant.

I pictured our ministries here a St. Barnabas.

I tried to picture what it might look like if we took our community even more seriously in caring for one another **and** in being cared for.

I don't know what it feels like to be homeless.

I don't know what it feels like to be truly hungry.

But I do know pain from other sources. And I know you all can say the same.

We can be "in community" with those whose pain we do not know **because** we do know pain. All of us do.

I'm going to, as I often do, remind you that most of us here have been baptized and in being baptized we have made a covenant with Jesus.

It is the same covenant he offered to the people sitting on the grass at the "first supper" and it is the same covenant that he made with his disciples at the "last supper". It is the covenant of love.

In the Book of Common Prayer this covenant is found on pages 304-305. It is a lot of words that really mean that we promise to God in Jesus Christ that we will love God and our neighbor as Jesus loves us.

Whenever we come together to partake of the bread and wine (that **is** profoundly made of up of Christ's body and blood); when we eat and drink we are remembering his death, but we are also reaffirming our covenant. We affirm that we are in unity with Christ, with one another, and with all of creation. This is not just some ritual; it is a commitment to Jesus and to one another that we are in communion.

Christ stood there that day with that crowd of people around him and invited them into communion with him. He invited them to love one another as he loved. He invited them to an eternity of peace.

We, as the communion of the Body of Christ, must

Remember his death,

Proclaim his resurrection

And be actively living our covenant by loving and being in community with one another and the world that God so loved as we await his coming again in glory.

There are two special ways that St. Barnabas offers community to those with troubles of any kind. Almost every week, Debbie Miller or Gerti Garner stand at the back

Rev. Susan Arnold
August 4, 2024

of our Church to offer personal healing prayer and anointing while the bread and wine are being distributed.

For those who are prevented from coming to church in person we continue the thousands-year-old tradition of bringing communion to them. It is not just a nice thing to do; it is the joining of the in-person community with those not physically present.

For me,

Jesus said, "do this in remembrance of me."

How in the world could I not partake?

Each time I receive and take him into my own body, I am taking in his love and at the same time sharing it with all of you.

There is no more beautiful ritual than this:
that I share this communion with all of you each week.