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**Communion & Character**

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 10-16; John 21:9-19

Many years ago I attended an ecumenical festival and had different experiences of communion each day. One morning I attended a liturgy that was led by a United Church pastor who I had never met but who had a very hospitable presence. In this case, I went forward with everyone else to receive the elements and as I glanced down to take bread from the basket the pastor was holding, she must have also glanced down at the volunteer name tag I was wearing, because when I looked up she looked me in the eye and said: “Alissa, this is the body of Christ, broken for you.”

I was caught off guard by how personal that gift felt. Suddenly this meal that I had eaten many times was made new with the speaking of my name by a stranger who really saw me. The body of Christ had been broken for me, Alissa. I was not an anonymous member of the crowd, I had been called to this table and I would be sent from it into the world. This table was on one hand utterly familiar and communal, and on the other hand, continually changed *my* life and *my* living.

Communion & Character. This meal contains the shape of our faith, and shapes the content of our living. You may have noticed a few details that have changed in each of our 3 Sundays of focusing on Communion. Today in the bulletin, rather than listing Communion or the Lord’s Supper, we have the Eucharist. You might think that’s a little high church for us. But the meaning of the word Eucharist, which comes from Greek, is Thanksgiving.

Eleanor Kreider, in her book *Communion Shapes Character*, explains that in the early centuries of the Church, “joyful thanksgiving was the dominant tone” of their eucharist celebrations. She writes:

“Christians were convinced that in Jesus the Messiah, God had inaugurated his kingdom, cosmic in its scope, and that they were to have their place within it. What grounds for joy and amazement! In their own time, God was bringing fulfillment of prophecies of the Old Testament. They were called to be God’s people of peace and reconciliation… Even though they were persecuted and killed, many of these Christians knew a joy and hope beyond bounds… They called their worship eucharist. An apt name it was, which caught both the spirit of their lives and the content of their prayers” (45-46).

Eucharist is Thanksgiving. Communion is about Thanksgiving. Communion is about our character. Just like Thanksgiving weekend cannot be the only time we take in a year to look around and thank God for abundant grace, also our taking of communion is not simply a ritual to get done 5 times a year.

We heard, in Deuteronomy, Moses conveying God’s words to the people: “what makes you truly alive is not the bread you eat but following every word that comes from the mouth of the Eternal One” (Deut 8:3).

The bread we gather to eat in the Eucharist meal, the cup we come to drink, remind us of every gracious gift we receive from God and call us to participation in God’s grace, particularly as that grace was lived out to the point of suffering and death by Jesus, and then overcame the violence and oppression of this world in the power of resurrection.

In communion, we give thanks, and our gratitude must shape our living. And this is a point in which communion is different than many other Christian practices. Nora Gallagher writes in *The Sacred Meal* that “You can pray alone and fast alone. You can even go on pilgrimage alone. But you can’t take Communion alone. More than any other practice, taking Communion forces us to be with others, to stand with them in a circle or kneel at the altar rail or pass a tray of grape juice and cubes of bread. We are forced to be with strangers and people we don’t like… It forces “them” to be with “us” and us to be with them… We are stuck with each other, at that altar, for at least a few minutes” (*The Sacred Meal*, 12).

You can’t take communion alone. So it is this practice that not only shapes our individual characters (“Alissa, this is the body of Christ, broken for you”), but this practice shapes the character of our community. Just as a small note, I think there is a connection here to the tradition of collecting for the Deacon Caring Fund every time we have communion. Not everyone is able to add to that financially, but many of us, in some season receive the care of the community through that gathered gift.

I spoke 2 Sundays ago about the economic justice issues in the Corinthian church that caused Paul to challenge whether the church – not individuals – but whether the church was worthily partaking of the supper. “You are leaving out the people who have no power to change the system”. That’s what Paul was saying to them. Kreider writes that Paul “pleaded with the Corinthians to realign their story with the story of Jesus… [to] reshape their own story so they would truly proclaim the Lord’s death through their life and worship” (201).

What might it mean to truly proclaim the Lord’s death? John Rempel, writing about early Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier, says that for him, “the supper is not a devotional contemplation of the crucifixion of Christ. It is an ethical summons to imitate Jesus’ surpassing act of self-giving. Just as Jesus offered himself for me, I offer myself for others.” (Vision, 26)

Our Mennonite Confession of Faith says it this way: “Remembering how Jesus laid down his life for his friends, we his followers recommit ourselves to the way of the cross.”

One writer calls the eucharist a demanding cup, “which calls us so clearly into a place of accountability in our relationships and to our neighbours,” and yet, he writes, it was what we need most of all (*Come to the Table*, 60).

One morning after Jesus’ resurrection, he came to his disciples again, and when they had finished their early morning work, he made them breakfast. He took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. And then, as he sat with Simon Peter, he asked him 3 questions: “Do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?”

At that table, Jesus grounded Peter in love. He also called Peter into the most radically life-changing journey imaginable: “Feed my sheep… and Follow me”. But Jesus did not ask, in this moment, Are you ready? Are you worthy? Or Are you certain? He asked; Do you love me?

Jesus sets the table in his love for us. And he asks: Do you love me? Will you tend my sheep? Will you follow me? When you are tested in the desert, will you obey me? When life is comfortable and full, will you remember me?

And in our gratitude for all that this table means of our participation in God’s grace, our lives are being shaped into bread broken for the world’s hunger, and a cup poured out to drench others in grace and forgiveness.

In our Communion celebration, the risen Christ calls us, makes and renews a covenant with us, and works gently away at the shape of our character, shaping us together into the forgiven and forgiving body of Christ (Kreiders, 162). For this, and all of God’s gracious acts of love, we offer thanks and praise.