



## Getting Theological: Eucharist I

John 6:51-58

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As people of faith, we often engage in practices and traditions with little understanding of the meaning or significance behind the act. One such practice, a longstanding tradition that is as old as the Christian Church itself, is the Eucharist – or as many call it, Communion, or the Lord’s Supper. Over the next two weeks we’re going to try and make the theological tangible, as we look the meaning, significance, practice, and envisioned outcome of this Christian tradition.

The Eucharist is a complicated tradition in the church, and perhaps is one of the hardest and most disputed practices that is still universally used by the Christian church world wide. Each denominational body claims different beliefs about who can take communion, what is happening at communion, how Christ is made present at communion, and the impact communion has on those who receive. While there are some similarities, the *practice* of communion also varies, often more at the local church level than along denominational lines.

First, let’s try and clear up the terminology so as we talk about this theological practice, we are all on the same page. In the Methodist Church, I have never seen, heard, or been taught to make a strong distinction between the language of Eucharist, Holy Communion, or the Lord’s Supper. In my normal vocabulary, these words tend to be interchangeable. However, there are many in the Christian world, including the full of the Roman Catholic Church, who make a distinction between these terms. Rev. Mark Gantley says, “The Eucharist is the [act] of sacrifice, praise and thanks celebrated by the priest at the altar ...”<sup>1</sup> That is to say, the term Eucharist refers to the entirety of the Invitation, the Confession and Pardon, the Passing of the Peace, the Great Thanksgiving, the Breaking of the Bread and Blessing of the Cup, the Prayers, and the Partaking of the Bread and Cup. Eucharist refers to the full preparation and receiving that is done at the table.

On the other hand, Holy Communion, Rev. Gantley says, is only one step of the Eucharist. Communion refers to the final step of the Eucharist, where the congregation receives the bread and partakes of the cup. You hear this emphasis on receiving when we talk about *taking* Communion. This makes sense when looking at the meaning behind the words. Communion is an offshoot of *common*, which means, ‘that which is shared with one another.’ So if the Eucharist is the full act of preparing, blessing, breaking, and receiving, Communion is just another way to refer to the final act of receiving – of sharing together.

On top of these two terms, we also use “the Lord’s Supper” to refer to the Eucharist. This term is less tied to any historical theological understanding, and is just a general term to talk about the congregation coming to the table for the purpose of engaging in a practice that was instituted by Christ himself.

In the Methodist Church we have a name for the practices that Christ took part in and instituted for his followers to partake – we call them sacraments. The Eucharist and Baptism are the two sacraments of

the United Methodist Church. We know Christ was baptized, and we know Christ calls disciples to go forth and baptize others. We also know Christ participated in this practice of the Eucharist – gathered with the disciples, Jesus blessed the bread and the cup and shared them with the disciples, saying, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Christ participated in both practices and instructed the faithful to do the same.

In the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) the practice of the Eucharist is instituted in the Upper Room prior to Jesus’ arrest. It is from these accounts we pull the language we use when we come to the table. You will hear the preacher at the table offer (what we call) the *Words of Institution*, which read: “On the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took the bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ When the supper was over, he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said, ‘Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”

What we read, learn, and practice from these synoptic accounts seems pretty straight forward. Christ is physically present with the disciples, and is holding up the bread and wine, and seems to be saying that these ordinary symbols are representative of his body and blood. These stories give us a visual that sets the tone for the meaning of the meal.

The Eucharist is the reminder of God’s already present self. Offered first in the hours before the betrayal, arrest, crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Christ, the Eucharist is established as a call for the faithful to remember God’s willing sacrifice and grace, offered to us in the person of Christ, revealing the truest nature of God. Founded in the context of the Last Supper with the disciples, we see this holy meal as God’s gift to us – it is God’s initiative – which serves as a reminder of the grace of God that is witnessed in Jesus Christ.

As a *reminder* of God’s action in Jesus Christ, the “Eucharist is a reliable *means* of grace, *not* grace *itself*.”<sup>ii</sup> The meal conveys God’s grace; it reminds us of God’s grace; in it we encounter God’s grace. But the meal is not God’s grace. “Grace resides in God’s action in Jesus Christ.”<sup>iii</sup> To encounter God’s grace, when we come to the table, our acts of preparation, blessing, breaking, and sharing call us to remember the fullness of Christ – “humble incarnation, ministry of teaching and healing, sacrificial death, transforming resurrection, presence in the church and world, and ultimate reign of righteousness.”<sup>iv</sup>

It is the grace of God, encountered, revealed, and made manifest in Christ, that has made new life possible for us, God’s created, who are broken and sinful. It’s God’s grace that calls us to see the brokenness in our own lives, that calls us to name our need of God for life, to acknowledge that Christ has given us salvation for abundant life, to name our reliance on God for freedom from the pain and guilt of sin, and it is God’s grace that leads us to live in ways that make manifest God’s love on earth.

We come to the table to participate in the Eucharist to be reminded of and to encounter God’s grace. Christ did not give instruction on how often we should participate in the meal. Christ simply offered, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Through the course of 2,000 years of Christian history, there have been many differences in the practice of the Eucharist. In the Roman Catholic Church, the practice is that the Eucharist is shared at every Mass – every service. But that’s a rare practice in the greater

Christian world, especially in protestant and non-denominational churches. Some churches celebrate the Eucharist once every six months, perhaps only at Easter and Christmas; some churches only offer the Eucharist at special mid-week services; many others offer the Eucharist just once per month. There are some theological reasons why churches only offer it a couple times a year – there are some churches who just don't focus on the sacraments. However, for many churches, how often we take Eucharist is not a theological matter, but a practical one.

For example, let's consider the Methodist Church. When the Methodist movement arrived in America in the mid-Eighteenth Century, there were no ordained Methodist clergy. John Wesley had a real problem, from an ecclesial connection to the greater Christian body, having non-ordained members serving communion. In 1784, when the Methodist Episcopal Church was officially established, we saw Methodist clergy ordained for the first time. However, there weren't enough clergy to serve every faith community that had been created in the Colonies. Because only ordained clergy can preside over the table, these early Methodist communities would only celebrate the Eucharist when one of the ordained clergy came through town. With such a common practice, it became the norm for Methodist groups to receive communion only once in a while. This practice still exists in many, and perhaps most, Methodist Churches, who only celebrate the Eucharist once a month. It has nothing to do with their theological conviction of the significance of the Eucharist, its just a remnant of the practice of the church in its infancy.

Yet, Wesley himself believed one should receive Communion as often as possible. Wesley was known to receive Communion three to four times per week. "God's incarnational action in Christ is presented in the Eucharist again and again for the life of the world."<sup>v</sup> As broken people in need of God's grace, we can never be reminded enough, or seek to encounter God's grace enough. So, without the limitations of waiting for a circuit rider to come through town, here at Washington Street, we share at the table each week.

One of the most disputed aspects of the Eucharist is how exactly we encounter God's grace when receiving the bread and partaking of the cup. Going back to Christ's institution of the meal in the upper room, we seem to have this tame reading of the Eucharist, that says the bread and the wine are nothing more than symbolic entities that call us to remember Christ, his body and blood, which were broken and shed for us to have life. But John's Gospel offers a very different reading. Let's revisit what Jesus has to say in today's text, found in John 6.

Prior to this morning's reading in the text, Jesus has just performed the miracle feeding. He has used just a few loaves and a couple fish to feed some 5,000 persons. The next morning, the crowds go to find Jesus again, but Jesus isn't too pleased to see them. He responds to their showing up in verse 26, saying, "I tell you, you don't care about my signs and miracles, you are looking for me because you ate your fill of bread." He's calling it like he sees it. These people aren't there looking for someone who will lead them to true life, they're there looking for someone to give them food.

It's to this hungry following of Jews that Jesus speaks in verse 51. "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Now the crowd is a bit confused. Verse 52 says they argued amongst themselves, “What does this man mean,” they wondered, “we have to eat his flesh?” Let’s be honest, I’d be pretty put off by this too. Jesus seems to be calling for cannibalism in the presence of this following. Jesus speaks again, only strengthening his claim, “Truly, I tell you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

Cannibalism at its finest, right? When we look more closely at the text, it only gets worse. Jesus isn’t calling for a nice five-star meal where everything is cleanly cut and appetizing. The word he uses in verse 54 when calling them to eat his flesh is the Greek word *trogo*, which Rev. Scott Hoezee says carries a connotation of “chewing with your mouth open.”<sup>vi</sup> It’s like gnawing on a over-sized turkey bone. Jesus is getting dirty and gritty, saying, you need to sink your teeth into this flesh, for this is the flesh of true life. He follows that up with a scene from *Vampire Diaries*, calling on those who wish to be faithful to drink his blood.

This call by Christ in John doesn’t come across near as nice or simply symbolic as it does in the other gospels. It seems we’re not called to just have bread and wine that remind us of Christ, but we’re to actually eat the physical body, and drink the literal blood, of Christ.

The presence of the physical – the actual – body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist is still a deeply debated topic throughout the church. “The Christian church has struggled through the centuries to understand just how Christ is present in the Eucharist.”<sup>vii</sup> There are a few different understandings of how Christ is made manifest in the meal, which each seek to articulate the presence of Christ in a way that affirms and is loyal to the Biblical text.

The Roman Catholic Church upholds an understanding called *Transubstantiation*. In this understanding, the bread and wine are changed into the actual body and blood of Christ. The **real presence** of Christ is encountered in the meal, fulfilling the call in John 6. The belief is that in the consecration of the elements, the substance of bread turns into the substance of the body, and the substance of the wine turns into the substance of the blood.

Another understanding, one that is professed by the Lutheran Church, is called *Consubstantiation*. The belief is that there is a **sacramental union** of the bread and wine with the body and blood of Christ. You’ll often hear this defined as saying Christ is present “in, with, and under” the elements of bread and wine. The body and blood, and the bread and wine maintain distinct identities, but the two are both present at the meal.

Another understanding of Christ’s presence, one often believed by Reformed churches, is called *Receptionalism*. The belief here is that Christ is spiritually present, but not physically. This claim holds that Christ is physically present in heaven, and cannot therefore be physically present in the Eucharist. Through the gift of the Spirit, Christ is made spiritually present, so we are communing with Christ, but that the bread and wine are nothing more than symbols of this gift.

Still, other churches believe there is no physical or spiritual presence of Christ. We call this understanding *Memorialism*. In this practice, along the lines of Baptist thought, the Lord’s Supper is

simply a remembrance. It calls us to remember by reenactment Christ's suffering and to think of the new life we have because of Christ's sacrifice; yet in the meal we are not encountering a spiritual or physical representation of the body and blood of Christ.

In true Methodist form, we profess an understanding that doesn't fully align with any one of these other four. The Methodist tradition does believe in the real presence of Christ; this is not simply a remembrance or memorial meal wherein Christ is *only* spiritually present, or not really present at all. Like the Catholic and Lutheran churches, the Methodist tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. However, we do not support the doctrine of transubstantiation, which claims to define a physical change in the elements. Nor do we support Consubstantiation, which says the two maintain unique identities, while both being present. The focus for the Methodist Church, stemming from Wesley's teaching, has always been that though we believe in the reality of Christ's presence, we do not seek to claim to be able to explain it fully. "In the Holy Meal ... the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God's saving gift for the whole world."

It is our inability to fully define Christ's presence that shapes our Prayer of Thanksgiving, which we offer at the end of Communion each week. We pray, "We give you thanks for this holy mystery in which you have given yourself to us." It's a mystery how Christ is made present – but Christ *is* present. The focus of the meal, as it was instituted by Christ, is *not* for us to argue and fight over whether we have the right understanding of Christ's presence in the meal, it is an invitation for us to receive God's grace.

In the meal, we are connected with the Lord, who gave himself – who shed his blood and gave up his body – that you and I, broken as we are, may have healing; full of sin as we are, may be forgiven our faults; bound as we are to death, may be gifted new life. We gather at the table each week to remember the love of God as witnessed in Jesus Christ. Regardless how it happens, or how Christ is made present, or how God's grace is shared in this meal ... the invitation of God is that in partaking in this meal, we are once more receiving the gift of Christ, we are filled with the empowering gift of the Spirit, and we are encountering the almighty love of God.

Friends, God extends the invitation to the table, that you may know more fully the witness of such life-giving love, that you may have renewed life, and that you may be filled with God's grace. For the glory of God, may we prepare to encounter the Lord in this holy meal. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark J. Gantley. *Eucharist vs. Communion*. January 31, 2005. ewtn.com. Retrieved August 14, 2018.

<sup>ii</sup> Laurence Stookey. *Eucharist: Christ's Feast With the Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Scott Hoezee. cep.calvinseminary.edu. Retrieved August 14, 2018

<sup>vii</sup> Do United Methodists believe the communion elements actually become the body and blood of Christ? umc.org. Retrieved August 14, 2018