



Getting Theological: Eucharist II

John 6:59-69

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It is sometimes hard to fully understand the practices we engaged in as people of faith. When we consider the theological nature of these traditions, it can be even more difficult to fully understand what they mean. So, we are seeking to make the theological more tangible. Last week we started looking at the Eucharist. If you missed last week's sermon, I recommend you go online and read, watch, or listen to it, as it offers some explanation around the origins of the Eucharist, including how we believe Christ is made present in the Eucharist, and the foundational understanding of the purpose of the Eucharist. This week, we will look at who is invited to the table to take Communion, and how God's invitation encourages our response.

The practice of the Christian church regarding the invitation to the table is as broad as the world is wide. As a seminarian, I had the opportunity (or should I say, I had the class requirement) to visit a number of churches of varying Christian traditions. I visited a Pentecostal Holiness church, a Missionary Coptic Orthodox church, and a Catholic church that worshipped with a full praise team ... I visited a rural African-American Baptist church, a large urban Presbyterian church, a Church of Christ (Scientist), and a couple of large non-denominational churches ... I've also worshipped in an urban Episcopalian church, a suburban Reformed church, and countless Methodist churches. There were times when I was visiting these churches that I felt extremely welcomed, and other times when I felt like I was in a strange and foreign land. I had many different experiences with worship - I was once refused communion, another time I was asked to step aside before being anointed with oil because they wanted to make sure I was a believer, and I was once asked to sit quietly in the back of the room to just observe worship.

I distinctly remember the Eucharist in one of the large evangelical churches. Jen and I were worshipping together on a Holy Thursday. The woman offering the invitation to the table as the plates of bread and juice cups were being passed throughout the room extended this invitation: she said, "If you are intentionally or unintentionally disobeying Christ in your life, let the plates pass from you." Jen and I both took communion that day, but I think the number of liars in the room would have been hard to count. (Intentionally or unintentionally disobeying Jesus?)

I don't want to speak ill of other traditions and to whom they extend Christ's table, but among the many reasons I love United Methodism, the *Open Table* is at the top of the list. What is an open table? You will hear me offer this invitation every week as we prepare to receive Communion, "In the United Methodist Church, we celebrate an open table. That means you do not need to be a member of this church, or any Methodist Church. All who seek Christ are invited to come and to receive." ... Being an open table means that all who choose to come forward and receive will be served.

However, let's parse this out a bit more. It is true that our practice in the Methodist Church is built upon John Wesley's belief and teaching. Wesley held a pretty strict understanding of who should come to the table to receive Communion. He had a conviction that one should be a believer before they come forward to receive. His teaching was founded upon the Scriptural tradition, where in it seems clear that the Eucharist was instituted and offered by Christ for those who followed and understood him as Messiah – the Son of God. Wesley believed that for a non-believer to take communion was to pervert the sacrament. If anyone can do this, if anyone can receive, what's the significance of it for the faithful? It is this stricter understanding that limits who can receive communion in many Christian traditions. Indeed, even when Wesley was preaching, one had to be registered before Sunday morning to receive Communion – the Pastor had to know who was coming ahead of time to ensure each was in good standing in the church.

However, such a practice has not been maintained in the Methodist Church – due largely to Wesley's greater teaching and understanding of God's grace. While Wesley desired for the church to maintain the sanctity of the sacrament, Wesley also believed in the Eucharist as a **converting** sacrament. If one is so moved to come forward to receive, even had they not previously been a believer in Christ, who are we as human pastors to deny the movement of the Spirit to lead the person forward as a response to God's inviting grace? Surely, if in this meal of remembrance, one who already believes can encounter God's healing grace that *leads us back* toward faithful living, just as sure can someone who has never previously believed also encounter God's grace to lead them *into* a life of faithfulness.

There is also a very clear Biblical foundation for meals with Christ being open to all, even non-believers, and that such meals are transformative in nature. How many times did Christ eat with those who were seen as outcasts by the faith community – sinners, tax-collectors, and others – and when the person left the meal, their belief in Christ had been established. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus walked with the men and opened the scriptures to them, explaining how he (Jesus) was revealed in the historic texts of their faith as the Messiah. Yet, it wasn't until Jesus broke the bread with them that they knew him to be Christ. There is transforming power when encountering God's grace at Christ's table.

Today's scripture in John 6 also gives us a foundational text that demonstrates Christ's invitation. Let's back up just a bit to set the scene: Christ had offered the miracle feeding, turning 5 loaves and 2 fish into enough food to feed 5,000 people. He and the 12 disciples crossed over the lake to Capernaum. The large crowd woke up the next day and went to find Christ. After they asked him for food, Jesus chastised them, and instead offered to them that he was the bread of life. He told them that anyone who ate his flesh and drank his blood would never go hungry or thirst again. That leads us to today's text, which in verse 59 begins, "He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?""

We talked at length last week about why Jesus' teaching would have been difficult to understand. Jesus is teaching in a synagogue – he is teaching the Jewish community about eating flesh and drinking blood. His listeners, people of deep faith, had no prior understanding of the Eucharist. So while we may hear this teaching and think of bread and wine, without question, his hearers thought he was speaking of his literal body and blood. They probably thought he was actually encouraging cannibalism. So yes, this is a difficult teaching. Who can accept it?

Jesus responds to their disgust and complaint. He says, "Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe." He continued, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless granted by the Father."

At this response, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him."

Interesting isn't it? The final note here, coming in verse 66, says that those who turned back were indeed *disciples*. John doesn't give us the luxury of thinking of them as simply a hungry crowd who was hoping for more food. This large gathering was defined as disciples of Jesus. They had a belief that his teachings were life giving and necessary. They may have followed him to some extent because he could provide bread – like the Israelites wandering in the wilderness who followed Moses as he was able to have God rain down manna from heaven. It is often food that motivates us. But these were not just beggars for food – these were people who had a desire to learn from, and live out the teachings of Jesus. They were disciples. But here, Jesus has gone to far and they turn away.

Did they turn away because they drew the line at cannibalism? Maybe they turned back because Jesus is too philosophical in his teaching. Or, perhaps they turned away because Jesus here is contradicting himself. After claiming that one must eat of his flesh, because he is the bread of life, he then says, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless." Which is it Jesus, do I need to eat flesh, or just receive the spirit?

This text models the invitation to the Eucharist. All are invited by Christ – he makes himself available to all who seek true and abundant life; but the reality is, some will turn away. Even dedicated and faithful disciples who have heard his teaching, and followed him, will turn back. Christ's teaching is hard to understand, hard to grasp, and sometimes hard to live. Yet, Christ continues to make himself available to all: he continues to dine with those who do not yet believe, he continues to make God's love known, and he continues the journey toward Jerusalem, where he will give himself for the salvation of all creation. "There is no Jewish (or Christian) thought in which the divine will renders the human will inoperative."ⁱ The invitation is always there, but we must choose to respond. What does that response look like?

After the majority of his followers have turned back, Christ turned to the 12 disciples and asks, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go?"

I always laugh when I read this response. My college was located in the middle of nowhere in the Appalachian Mountains, south of Roanoke. I had a barber that was located just a half-mile from campus, who cut my hair exclusively while I lived in Ferrum. The next barber shop was some 15 miles away. I loved my barber, but really, there were no other viable options. *Where else could I go? ...* Are the 12 disciples really following Jesus because they have full belief in him, or just because there are no alternatives?

But Peter continues, “You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe that you are the Holy One of God.”

In Peter’s words come the faithful response to the Eucharist – to receive Christ.

One can look around the world and claim how void it is of Christ’s presence. We are told, even as young children, that God is everywhere. God is in nature; God is in our relationships; God is present in our jobs; God is present in our marriages; God is present in our children. And yet, there are days when it is hard to see God’s presence. When the world is so broken, that we just can’t see God, we gather at the table to see God clearly at work for us through bread and wine – combined with God’s mighty word of forgiveness, acceptance, and life. “For as Jesus’ real presence in the world, the sacraments are the one place we may look and know for sure that we will find God in Christ there for us.”ⁱⁱ

When we come and receive the bread and the wine, when we partake in the body and the blood of Christ, we are not just eating and drinking simple earthly elements. “For John eating the bread and drinking the wine are metaphors for taking into one’s body, mind, and soul the climax of the incarnation in the death of Jesus.”ⁱⁱⁱ We do not just eat and drink, we embody the body and blood. You hear this invitation in the prayers at the table. Our response to God’s invitation is to allow the incarnate Christ to reside in us, so fully that in partaking of the body and blood, we become for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.

In receiving Communion, we are receiving the life of Christ. This is how Jesus saves. “Jesus saves life by giving life. Creating is the means of redeeming.”^{iv} And the life we receive leads us to respond, not as fallible humanity, but as those who have received new life by being filled with the life of Christ.

I know that this life is exhausting. I know you’re tired, you’re worn out, and that, even with lengthy summer vacations and world travels, that you’re not fully rested. And I know that when we look at some of the national storylines, we question God’s goodness. From child abuse in the church, to immigrant abuse by the nation, to the death of well respected leaders. Even in our personal lives, when we’re beaten down by coworkers, job schedules, and deadlines; when our relationships are draining, and our children ... they just need to go back to school, we wonder, where is the God who strengthens us? Our exhaustion turns to doubt, and our doubt manifests in our personal and communal lives. When we are so exhausted, we may not openly

renounce God, but we don't make the effort to be at church. We may become more easily flippant with people, not stopping to help others, because what God is out there really cares?

In the New Colossus, the Statue of Liberty claims, "*Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*" The invitation to the table is really quite similar. For such new life, such welcome, such gift of grace, they are offered by God in Christ, who invites us to receive these gifts through this table. We need not be perfect, or have our act together. We need not have perfect faith, nor fully understand the theological underpinning of this meal. We need not be intentionally or unintentionally obeying Christ. The invitation to the table is to all who seek life – new life, graceful life, salvation life, life filled with Christ. Our response is also one of *invitation*, not imperative. We are not demanded to be better people; we are not required to better live the commands of the Biblical text. In receipt of this gift, we are invited to be filled with Christ, that we may embody Christ for the world.

So as we prepare to once more come to the table, may you prepare yourself to encounter the invitation of God, to receive the presence of Christ in your life, that you may have new life through the gift of our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Gerard Sloyan. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: John*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱ David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved August 22, 2018.

ⁱⁱⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

^{iv} Loye Bradley Ashton. *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.