

## “Blessings of the Table”

A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for  
The Congregation of St. John’s United Church of Christ, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

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This morning, we will be celebrating Holy Communion, a ritual of our faith that we observe monthly and perform in a predictable way. But sometimes, the celebration of Holy Communion can take unexpected turns, as it did in the following story by an anonymous author.

**It was at the end of the week when summer church camp was drawing to a close that I found myself with a group of counselors and campers enjoying mountain pies around a campfire. If you've never had a mountain pie, they are made by toasting two slices of bread and filling in a pie iron, creating a small pastry-like treat.**

**The night before everyone returned home was often the high point of the week, a time to share stories, laugh, cry, and celebrate communion. After we had finished singing camp songs and had all eaten our fill, I went to the cooler to get the communion supplies.**

**But they weren't there. I found a cup, a plate and a cloth, but no bread or juice. Looking around, I found at the edge of the woods a punctured juice container and a piece of shredded plastic wrap that had held the communion bread. It seems that a nighttime visitor with a mask and a striped tail decided to have communion on his own.**

**No problem, I thought. We've got back-up supplies. But when I returned to the campfire, I discovered to my dismay that the entire loaf of bread had been used to make mountain pies.**

**After I announced our predicament to the group, one resourceful camper pointed out that there was one mountain pie that hadn't been eaten. It hadn't been eaten because it had been left in the fire too long and was burned almost beyond recognition.**

**Nonetheless, we salvaged what we could, asked God's forgiveness, and celebrated communion that night by passing around a gallon jug of orange drink and some blackened bits of crust.<sup>1</sup>**

A blackened crust as the body of Christ? Orange drink as the blood of Christ? That would have sounded pretty outlandish to me in the past. However, there was a time at a church I served when we celebrated Holy Communion with torn-up hotdog rolls and grape Gatorade. That happened because the individual responsible for preparing the Communion elements had forgotten to get the needed bread and grape juice. As I would later say to congregants, “We not only received the Spirit, but electrolytes, as well.” How can you beat that?

I know a number of congregants and church pastors who would be extremely upset over the enactment of Holy Communion as portrayed in our opening story or as took place at my previous church. They would insist that the blood of Christ has to be represented by wine, not even grape juice. Christ’s body must be symbolized by bread, and only a specific kind made in an approved fashion. Further, the bread and wine would need to be consecrated by an authorized clergy member, and then served under the watchful care of him or her. Otherwise, the bread could not be mysteriously transformed into the body of Christ or the wine into his blood. The Lord’s Supper would fail to serve its divine purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> This story, “A Thief in the Night,” published by Austin Hornyak, September 4, 2011, appears as part of a longer posting, “Sunday Reflections: Communion Stories.” It is found at *Patch.com*, <http://patch.com/pennsylvania/dormont-brookline/sunday-reflections-communion-stories>. Accessed 29 September 2015. The first sentence was altered for readability.

And what is the purpose of Holy Communion? At least from the perspective of some Christians, the Lord's Supper is about individual confession of sin, expression of remorse, and the seeking of reconciliation with God by joining with the body and blood of Christ, the Lamb of God slain on the cross for our redemption.<sup>2</sup> Holy Communion is understood to be a kind of replacement for the system of animal sacrifices made on altars as decreed by God in ancient Israel, something overseen by priests and meant to purify sinful individuals so they could be in right relationship with the Holy One.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this sentiment is echoed in today's reading from Hebrews 2, which declares of Jesus, "In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered" (Hebrews 2:10, New International Version).

This way of thinking about the Lord's Supper is actually the dominant perspective and one that has been around for a long time.<sup>4</sup> It certainly was the view of my youth. I vividly remember regularly taking part in the Lord's Supper when I was young. We always had to leave our pew seats and go forward to kneel before the altar. There, the pastor would personally feed us a wafer of bread and a sip of wine from a common cup, while the communion hymn of, "Just As I Am," was played slowly on the organ and the congregation sang it mournfully. Do you recall the words of the second and fifth verses?

**Just as I am, and waiting not  
To rid my soul of one dark blot,  
To thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,  
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!**

**Just as I am, Thou wilt receive,  
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;  
Because Thy promise I believe,  
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!**<sup>5</sup>

The Lord's Supper was always solemn, filled with judgment, guilt, and a sense of isolation and unworthiness. I can't say I ever felt the grace or love of God at those times. I didn't sense the presence of Christ. I just knew that as a sinner, I had gained a temporary reprieve from God's punishment.

Is that really what the Lord's Supper is supposed to be? Is that how Jesus, Paul, and the early church meant for us to experience it? Careful study of Jesus' lived example and the biblical witness tell us, "No!" It was envisioned to be something quite different. It is meant to be a happy and hopeful opportunity to come to a table and dine in the loving and supportive presence of God and each other.<sup>6</sup> The Lord's Supper is about receiving holy blessings.

According to Professor of Theology, John Mark Hicks, any discussion about Holy Communion has to be done in relation to Jesus' shared meals, which nearly always took place around a table.<sup>7</sup> In Jesus' day, the meal table was a powerful symbol of a caring and supportive community.<sup>8</sup> Individuals invited to dine there were regarded as equals who served the wellbeing of each other.<sup>9</sup> That is why it was revolutionary for Jesus to eat with a variety of people who seldom interacted socially in positive

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<sup>2</sup> John Mark Hicks, *Come to the Table: Revisioning the Lord's Supper* (Abilene, Texas: Leafwood Publishers, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> These lyrics from the song, "Just As I Am," are quoted from the version that appears as hymn no. 342 in *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, Tom Fettke, Senior Editor (Nashville, Tennessee: Word Music, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> Hicks, *Come to the Table*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

ways.<sup>10</sup> Such persons included men and women, rich and poor, healthy and sick, righteous and unrighteous.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus used the meal table to heal social bonds between contrasting groups of people and to declare that everyone is acceptable in the eyes of God.<sup>12</sup> Jesus also used shared meals as occasions to reveal the presence of God among the diners and to teach them how build the Holy One's realm on earth, human communities grounded in compassion, love, acceptance, equality, and social justice.<sup>13</sup> Jesus' meal ministry inspired happiness and hope in the lives of those who ate with him by calling them to live kingdom lives.<sup>14</sup>

These truths are even evident in the Last Supper, the basis for our ritual of Holy Communion. Think about it. Jesus' final meal with his followers was actually a joyful celebration of Passover, a remembrance of God's fulfilled promise to liberate the Hebrew slaves from bondage in Egypt and to lead them to new life.<sup>15</sup> It also reminded the Hebrew people of God's presence among them and that with the Holy One's help, they could trust in better tomorrows. As a sign of the inclusivity of the meal, Jesus dined with his disciples, individuals of varying backgrounds and temperaments, who would later deny him, betray him, and abandon him. By doing what he did, Jesus indicated that they would find forgiveness and acceptance with God, and that they needed to do the same for each other.<sup>16</sup> Further, Jesus beckoned his followers to continue to be a caring and supportive community, despite their differences, and to devote their lives to something greater than themselves, namely the establishment of God's kingdom through selfless service to everyone.<sup>17</sup> This is what he meant when he said to them, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me," (Luke 22:19, New International Version) and, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20, New International Version).<sup>18</sup>

So, if we think of Holy Communion in terms of Jesus' meal ministry, then how should we approach it? Certainly, it should not be with feelings of isolation and unworthiness. It should be with the faith of a child, filled with delight, openness, and the expectation of good things in our lives. The Lord's Supper should become a special time of recognized blessings. What kind of blessings? The very ones conveyed through Jesus' table meals.

The invitation to gather around the table is a blessing of welcome and hospitality extended to us by God and Jesus.<sup>19</sup> Recall the words of Luke 22:15 (New International Version), when Jesus said to his disciples at the Last Supper, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you..." The invitation is a sign that we are already blessed with God's unmerited grace and acceptance.<sup>20</sup>

Our gathering around the communion table reminds us that we are an inclusive community, united in our desire to be faithful to God and Jesus. Here, we find the blessings of acceptance, mutual love, and support. In our prayers over the bread and cup, we acknowledge the blessing of the living and gracious presence of God and Jesus, in this world and in our lives. At the table, we dine with them.<sup>21</sup> As we break the bread and drink the cup, we reaffirm our devotion to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and to bringing into existence the ethical reign of the Holy One among all people.<sup>22</sup> It speaks to us of our commitment to selfless service, despite any personal risk, so others may join with

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Hicks, *Come to the Table*.

<sup>12</sup> Crossan, *Jesus*.

<sup>13</sup> Hicks, *Come to the Table*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: A Day-by-Day Account of Jesus' Final Week in Jerusalem* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Hicks, *Come to the Table*.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

us in kingdom living for their wellbeing and ours. This is a sacred task that gives our lives the blessings of purpose, meaning, and self-worth.

Finally, we receive the blessings of joy and hope, something we express in the Prayer of Thanksgiving at the end of the meal. We embrace the knowledge that our lives matter in the world to God and others. We live with the promise that God's kingdom is present and will grow ever more visible in the world. Where else can you find such wonderful and holy gifts, except at the table with God and Jesus?

I am certain that the young people at the church camp of our opening story recognized and received the divine blessings of the Lord's Supper, even if the meal was of burnt bread crust and a jug of orange drink. Holy Communion isn't about the particulars of the ritual or approaching a sacrificial altar. It is all about coming to a table to experience the living presence of God and Jesus, to foster the formation and health of a caring community, and to recommit to building God's kingdom on earth. Today, as we partake in the Lord's Supper, remember why we engage in this life-giving practice and take to heart all the blessings of the table. Let a new communion hymn sing in your heart.

**Come celebrate Jesus, come celebrate Jesus,  
The bread and wine, the moment in time.  
Come celebrate Jesus, the Spirit that frees us,  
His table has been laid, come now and celebrate Him.<sup>23</sup>**

Amen.

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<sup>23</sup> These lyrics are from the song, "Come Celebrate Jesus," and appears as part of hymn no. 324 in *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, Tom Fettke, Senior Editor (Nashville, Tennessee: Word Music, 1986).