

Acting Out sermon series
#4 – Setting the Table
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I love to eat. That's no surprise to anyone who's been around me for more than five minutes. It's not just the food I love, but the whole experience. Amy and I enjoy cooking dinner together, which usually consists of her doing most of the cooking and me saying, "Hmm, needs more BBQ sauce." She usually responds with, "This is a salad, Kory." The preparing of the food, the sharing of the meal, the conversation, the connection. Eating is far more than just a biological necessity; there's a deeper, soul-level meaning that gives a meal its importance. A meal can be a much-needed time of rest, refreshment, and especially relationship-building. We often talk about eating with someone as breaking bread together. In fact, the word "companion" literally means "to share bread with." When we eat together, we are not just a group of individuals gathered at a table; through the act of sharing space and nourishment, we are companions.

Today we conclude our sermon series on worship by focusing on the peculiar act of communion. Communion has been a central focus of our denomination ever since our beginnings in the early 1800s. But we also run the risk of neglecting the deep meaning in communion because it is something we experience so regularly. One of the objections I often hear to weekly communion is that it could become too routine, too familiar. Is that the case? Is communion just one more thing we do in worship?

The theology behind breaking bread has deep biblical roots. In the Hebrew scriptures, sharing a meal with someone meant sharing your nourishment, your sustenance, thereby acknowledging the inherent worth of the other person. It's like saying, "I value you enough to share my life-giving food with you." Of course, we know that God commanded the Israelites to share a meal on the night before they left Egypt, which became known as the Passover meal. And God provided bread from heaven for the Israelites as they wandered in the desert. "Give us this day our daily bread" has both spiritual and physical significance.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the bread represented the gift of God's provision, but do you know what represented God's anger? It was the cup. In Isaiah, God says to the prophet: "'Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.'" In Jeremiah, God says to Israel: "'You will drink your sister Samaria's cup, a cup large and deep; it will bring scorn and derision, for it holds so much.'" The cup was the symbol of divine anger and judgment. Even in Jesus' time, the cup symbolized pain and suffering. When he is praying in Gethsemane, the night before he is crucified, Jesus asks God: "'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.'" But at the Last Supper, Jesus transforms the cup from one of wrath to one of grace. The cup, which used to symbolize judgment, now symbolizes new life.

The New Testament models for modern communities the importance of sharing meals together. The feeding of the 5,000; Jesus' meal at the home of a prominent Pharisee; the meal in Emmaus with the risen Christ; the sharing of the fish on the beach at the end of John's gospel – all of these are significant events in the gospels which have as a central element the sharing of a meal. What did Jesus do on the last night of his life? He shared a meal with his closest friends in the Upper Room. Acts 2:42 tells us that one of the main functions of worship for the early church was the breaking of bread together.

Our Disciples of Christ founders sought to reclaim that early view of the importance of communion in their worship. Not only did they believe in the weekly observance of communion, but they also believed that everyone who made their confession of faith through baptism was welcome at the table, regardless of their denominational affiliation. This idea of communion being open to everyone flew in the face of many denominations and was one of the reasons our founders left their churches to start their own movement, which would eventually grow into the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The idea of open communion fit nicely with the idea that we are all followers of Christ, regardless of the earthly divisions we have created for ourselves. Unity is our polar star. The root for the word “communion” is the same for the word “community” and “communication.” Through communion, we communicate that we are a community, united together by our belief in Christ as our Lord and Savior.

That’s a message we need to be reminded of weekly, because we live in a world that elevates individualism and self-service. We are a united, forgiven people, but it’s so easy to forget that in the midst of the chaos and craziness of life. Communion is our divine Post-It Note. We know that regardless of what happens for six days, regardless of the conflicts, the disharmonies, the brokenness, the shortfalls, on that seventh day we will gather once again around a table to hear God’s merciful word and taste God’s gracious goodness. If our faith suffers from short-term memory, we don’t have to wait long to be reminded of God’s love for us and the forgiveness so freely offered to us. Communion is not a magical elixir that wipes away our problems; it is simply a reminder that God is with us always. Communion’s reliable presence in our worship mirrors God’s reliable presence in our lives.

That’s why I love that our celebration of communion isn’t passive. During communion, the proclamation of God’s presence happens through actions. In fact, I like to think of the service of communion as a re-enactment. We are acting out again the actions of Jesus that night in the Upper Room. Therefore, communion is meant to be an active engagement. As Disciples, we believe that in the act of communion, in the act of sharing a meal together, Christ becomes fully present with us. In a sense, the bread and the cup re-present Christ to us each Sunday, and we are once again reconnected to our Savior by actively remembering his sacrifice for us.

Ask yourself this: would communion be as meaningful, as spiritually nourishing, if all we did was look at the break and cup, not partake of it? Communion is meant to be a sensual experience, meaning that it engages all our senses, not just our ears. There is something about actually hearing Jesus’s words and seeing the bread broken and the cup being lifted up and smelling the juice and touching the bread and tasting the elements that makes us participants in the celebration and actors in the re-enactment. Far beyond the reach of words, communion makes Christ’s presence with us tangible, for each of us and for all of us.

By coming to the table together, something within us and between us is fundamentally transformed. In the movie “Babette’s Feast,” a political refugee named Babette finds shelter in a secluded seaside town in Norway. The people of the colorless town are very stoic, divided from each other over their differing beliefs and afraid to express their true emotions to each other. As a way of thanking the town for taking her in, Babette, an accomplished chef, decides to cook a lavish meal for everyone, including fine china, table linens, and the most sumptuous food imaginable. On the night of the feast, the townfolk come trudging into the dining room, barely acknowledging each other, and take their place at the table. And as Babette begins to serve the meal, something miraculous happens. The people who were once so cold and somber come to life with laughter and conversation as they break bread together. The two neighbors who have

argued for years sit next to each other and tell stories. The elderly widow and widower who've always been afraid to express their interest in each other share "come hither" looks. This collection of individuals has been transformed by the table into a community.

That's one of the blessed paradoxes of communion. While it unites us together as a community, it also symbolizes the individual gift we each receive through this meal. I first fully realized this during a chapel service at my seminary. For communion, we all came forward, tore off a piece of bread and dipped it into the cup, a method known as intinction. As I did so, the person holding the bread looked me in the eye and said, "Kory, this is Jesus' body, broken for you." The person holding the cup said, "Kory, this is Jesus' blood, shed for you." That experience made me realize the intimate nature of communion. That body, that blood, it was broken and shed – for me. But not just for me.

I was in a denominational meeting once and we were discussing the relevance of the table for us as Disciples. We were also struggling to articulate what was distinctive about our understanding of the table. One lady, a representative of another denomination, said simply, "For Disciples, the table travels." In other words, the meaning of what happens here doesn't stay here. It travels with us into our lives, into the world, going with us where we go, offering grace and love and peace as we extend our hands to others. As we seek to be a movement in this fragmented world, we do not do this alone. This table travels. The meaning we find here goes with us when we leave this place to share God's love and make connections.

When we raise our cup each Sunday, we raise it to honor the Lord of Life, and to offer our lives as servants. When you put that bread in your mouth, when you touch that cup to your lips, remember: The body has been broken – for you, the blood has been shed – for you, a life has been given – for you. And because of it, you are offered this amazing gift of forgiveness and new life through Christ. If you forget that this week, that's OK. We're human. Just come on back next Sunday. Another meal will be prepared, another loaf will be broken, another cup will be poured out. For you. But not just for you. Someone out there needs a companion, some to break bread with them and remind them they are loved by God. Who's going to take this table to them?