

## THE MEAL OF INCLUSIVITY<sup>1</sup>

John 6: 48-51

A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens

June 5, 2011

After reading an article in this week's *Christian Century*<sup>2</sup> written by a man named Craig Barnes, who talks about how different his two grandmothers were and what he learned from each of them, I began to think of how different my own grandmothers were. Maybe you too will remember what different things you learned from your two grandmothers.

### I

One of my grandmothers was rather aristocratic and lived in a city. When my family visited her, my brother and I knew that she loved us. But when it came time for meals, it was a formal affair. We ate in the dining room on fine china. There was a lace tablecloth and crystal. I learned from her how to set a table correctly, and I learned that you use the several forks lined up in order of courses, outside in! She emphasized table manners that required that we do all things by the rules.

Then there was my other grandmother, who lived in the country. When we visited her, we ate at the large kitchen table. Food came from the garden, and it

---

<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, June 5, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Barnes, "Two Grandmothers," in *The Christian Century*, May 20, 2011.

2

was plentiful. She made a corn recipe that I can still taste; there were luscious tomatoes almost as big as grapefruits that were picked right out of the garden and brought to the table. If a friend showed up at the door for a visit, there was always a place made for one more at the table. I don't remember lace tablecloths or multiple forks or many rules to follow! It was full of good food and fun and laughter.

I learned a great deal from both grandmothers, and of course I loved them both. But it strikes me that the church over 2,000 years has struggled over which grandmother to follow when it comes to the central act of Christian worship: the Lord's Supper.

There are churches that emphasize the manners of Communion. The manners include believing what a particular church teaches about what exactly happens at the Lord's Supper. Catholics traditionally have believed in what is called *transubstantiation*, the conviction that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus. Lutherans affirm what they call *consubstantiation*, the principle that the bread and wine are not changed into the body and blood of Jesus, but that Christ is "in, with, and under" the bread and wine. Other Protestants, including Baptists, reject both transubstantiation and consubstantiation, and understand this meal as a memorial to Christ and what he did. However, a friend

of mine says with a grin that Baptists also believe in transubstantiation: we believe that at the table Welch's grape juice is turned into wine!

## II

Christian worship from the very beginning has been built around two parts: the service of the Word, inherited from the Jewish synagogue service, and the service of the table, inaugurated by Jesus. Some make the service of the table a weekly observance. In the church of my childhood, we observed the Lord's Supper only once a quarter because people believed that observing it too often would somehow cheapen it, making it too familiar. Besides, doing it every Sunday is what the Catholics did, and we were certainly not Catholics!

When we lived for a time in Scotland and worshipped at the St. Andrews University Chapel, we learned from the university chaplain that in far northern Scotland there are some members of the Church of Scotland who will only take the Lord's Supper once in a lifetime! They delay it until they are fairly certain they are about to die because of the belief that they cannot sin after taking the Lord's Supper!

## III

But let us pause to think exactly what it is we are doing when we engage in this ancient ceremony we call Communion. First, it is what the ancient church

called a *Eucharist*. We do not often use that word in our church, but that doesn't change the fact of its meaning. *Eucharist* means giving thanks for the good gift.

Have you noticed that people in the most extreme circumstances, the most tragic of times, will still want to take communion. We can all remember the crowds of Haitians after their terrible earthquake in Port o'Prince lined up to take communion. We can picture congregations after tornadoes gathered in a sanctuary with the roof blown off, taking communion. Sometimes there are no words adequate for the times, and yet Christians still gather to take communion.

What are they doing? They are giving thanks for the great gift of the spirit of Christ with them in such difficult circumstances. Here at this table, whatever our circumstances, we are giving thanks for the presence of Christ with us. Human language cannot describe or contain that presence, but the symbols of his body and blood communicate it, and we are thankful beyond words.

This sense of gratitude is the reason I, and hope you too, have long ago rejected the idea of limiting those who can participate in communion. Jesus, after all, was not known for being exclusive in his meals. He was sometimes criticized for eating with people whom a respectable person would avoid: the marginalized, the outcasts, the hated. His practice of eating meals demonstrated an amazing inclusivity that ignored social boundaries based on superficial differences.

So it is ironic that churches came up with the idea of “closed communion,” that is, limiting those who could participate in the Lord’s Supper. Rather, we practice “open communion,” inviting all to participate this meal. After all, this is not OUR table; it is Christ’s table. This church is not the host; Christ is the host.

We meet Christ here in a wordless communion. We need no words to communicate his presence; we only need an openness and a yearning. Even those who are not Christians are welcome to take this communion because the Lord’s Supper is a wordless evangelistic ministry. Grace is at work here, and we believe that God can reach out to us with bread and grape juice as well as God can reach out through music and words spoken.

#### IV

From earliest times in the Christian church the Lord’s Supper has been accompanied by an exchange of peace, or sometimes called the “kiss of peace.” This represents the peace that God intends for all of us, even in the most trying of times. Old grievances are given up. At this table the rich and the poor eat the same thing and eat it together. At this table there is a symbolic fulfillment of the prayer we pray each Sunday: *give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors....*

Thus we pass the peace and conclude with the singing of *Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.* Communion, in other words, is not just vertical; it is also horizontal.

So the service of the word is nearly over. We are about to move into the service of the table, rich with symbolic meaning and open to all. Listen to the words we sing:

*No storm can shake my inmost calm  
While to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Christ is Lord of Heaven and earth,  
How can I keep from singing?*<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Words and music by Robert Lowry (1826 – 1899), “How Can I Keep From Singing?” Robert Lowry was a Baptist minister and a prolific hymn writer. Among many other hymns, he wrote “Shall We Gather at the River,” “I Need Thee Every Hour,” and “We’re Marching to Zion.”