

A famous Zen master, Seigen Ishin, is quoted as having said, “Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains, and waters as waters. When I arrived at a more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got its very substance I am at rest. For it's just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters.” He doesn't mean that he has reverted back to his old way of seeing. He means that after he had developed the capacity to see all the layers of meaning that there can be in mountains or water, he was freed to see them just exactly as mountains and water. It's for this reason that Thich Nhat Hanh recommends exercises like peeling carrots or washing dishes—just do those things, paying attention, not multi-tasking, not absent-mindedly, so that you are fully attentive to the peeling of a carrot or the cleansing of a dish.

Part of the genius of Christianity that our core practice, communion, has all those layers of meaning and is complete and sufficient just as itself. Jesus took this elemental experience of eating with other people and told us that it was a foretaste of the kingdom of God. Think about this. Meals are often the nexus of an important event. I have a photo of us eating lunch in St. Paul with Tom's old college friend and her husband who were dropping off their daughter at Macalester, as we were dropping off Bea at Macalester. The girls became good friends, but at this moment they didn't know each other. In this picture we are all simultaneously nervous about our daughters starting college *and* joyful to have found old friends unexpectedly. It made intuitive sense to sit down and eat together to commemorate this juxtaposition of emotions.

We serve the Table of Plenty not just because we know people get hungry, but because a thoughtfully-prepared meal offered with welcome encapsulates the experience of grace that we know as the kingdom of God. We could probably do it more efficiently and cheaply by ordering boatloads of frozen entrees from Costco or something, but efficient and cheap undercut welcome and grace. So we ransack our refrigerators and gardens, Ann makes the famous meatloaf and Mary produces her enchiladas, June makes the cheesy potatoes without which there would be sadness and gloom, Ron makes something amazing out of what's in season. It all comes together in a symphony of quirky options, often requiring repeat visits to the table in order to try everything.

And of course Jesus sat down and ate with people time after time after time, preaching without words. In Matthew 8, after he had healed Peter's mother-in-law, her response was to serve him a meal. In chapter 9, he sat at dinner with "many tax collectors and sinners," and the Pharisees interrogated his disciples about his loose behavior. But Jesus said, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." In chapter 14 he feed a crowd of over 5000 with the little that was on hand, and the leftovers filled 12 baskets. In John's gospel, Jesus' first miracle was to turn water into wine at a wedding party. In Luke's gospel, Jesus invited himself to eat at the home of Zacchaeus, an unpopular and perhaps unvirtuous man, signaling his regard for this unregardable outcast. Jesus' table fellowship meant inclusion, disregard for social barriers, the abundance that God offers, celebration.

Finally, Jesus' table fellowship at the last supper meant that there was no red

line past which he would quit enacting God's love. Even if it meant going to his death, he would still insist on breaking down barriers, calling out what injures or demeans people, demonstrating that the empire of Caesar is not the kingdom of God. He drew the parallel between the bread and wine at dinner and his own physical self, saying that even death would not keep him from bringing the kingdom of God to us—that in fact, when we remembered his death, we would do it by sharing food, re-presenting the kingdom in that practice.

A simple, basic human practice, eating with others, thus carries the freight of Jesus' entire message: God is with you, whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey. God is keeping you going, God is bringing you home. It is, as they say, a liminal experience: it is where ordinary and sacred meet along a line that, as math teachers will tell us, takes up no space of its own at all.

The church at Corinth, just a few decades after Jesus' crucifixion, had already got it wrong. Paul is scolding them because when they got together to eat, they apparently didn't share their food or save any for people who might come late because they were working. The rich ate well and the poor sometimes didn't eat at all, and Paul says, "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper." This is why he goes on to repeat how Jesus instituted the Lord's supper, to remind the Corinthians that this isn't primarily about filling your stomach but about celebrating the kingdom of God in which social barriers mean nothing and everybody belongs. Maybe the church could not change society completely, but it **could** enact the alternative society that Jesus had presented as he lived.

And look what happened. With all its faults, the church has managed to

preserve this liminal experience pretty well! Yes, there are places where you have to be a member in order to participate, or prepare yourself in some way first, but by and large we've managed to keep the gift that Jesus gave us, the gift of welcome, belonging, refueling, finding home on the road. It signals to us that there is no red line beyond which God will not go to reach us, not even death.

When Bea was about four, at the Urbandale church, we were passing the tray of little juice cups down the pew and she took one and smiled at me and clinked it against mine festively before drinking it. You could say that there was a lot she didn't know yet about the meaning of communion. She did know, though, that it was good and that we did it together. This congregation and the Urbandale church then spent many years educating her about all the layers of meaning built into this one simple ritual, and later she majored in religion at college, and now she's 25 and I bet you she could write sermons about the meaning of the Lord's supper, as could any one of you. But ultimately we all come to know that a mountain is simply a mountain, and water is simply water. Remember Peter Mayer's words from "Holy Now":

When Holy water was rare at best  
It barely wet my fingertips  
but now I have to hold my breath  
like I'm swimming in a sea of it  
It used to be a world half there  
Heaven's second rate hand me down  
but I walk it with a reverent air  
cause Everything is Holy now

That's why communion is a sacrament. Even if all you understand is that it's good and we do it together, it's an experience of the sacred embodied in the ordinary and

everyday. It is so much more than a meal, *because* it is just a meal.

This is not communion Sunday, but every Sunday we're called to take the spirit of communion from here out into the world. We're called to live lives shaped on the template of communion: hospitality, kinship, joy. Thank goodness our ancestors at Corinth got it wrong so that Paul could correct them, and twenty centuries later we can carry the kingdom of God to all the places we may go.

Let us pray:

All or nothing. You seek both and neither. When it is all about me, the feast is fallow. When I have nothing to bring, the feast is a place of plenty. When it is all about others, the feast becomes community. When others are considered nothing, the feast is wasteful and wasted. May we wait for, and wait on, one another.