

# Defining Words of Faith 4: *Sacrament*

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Isaiah 55:1-5

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. <sup>2</sup>Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. <sup>3</sup>Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. <sup>4</sup>See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. <sup>5</sup>See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

## 1 Corinthians 11:17-22

<sup>17</sup>Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. <sup>18</sup>For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. <sup>19</sup>Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. <sup>20</sup>When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. <sup>21</sup>For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. <sup>22</sup>What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

This summer on the choir's trip to Israel and Jordan, we ate over 40 meals together either as one large group or in smaller combinations of folks. But of all of those meals - only one of them was inside someone's home. All the rest were in our hotels or restaurants...maybe even a few perched on a bench in a crowded market sampling the local falafel and shawarma. But only one meal where we were welcomed and cared for as guests in the ancient tradition of middle eastern hospitality.

That meal took place in the home of our Palestinian guide Kamal who spent a long day with us in Bethlehem, taking us to the fields where just maybe those shepherds were watching over their flocks by night, the cave where tradition holds that Mary and Joseph welcomed their son and God incarnate into the world, and of course to the community center where our Sanctuary choir would spend the afternoon working and performing together with the Amwaj Choir - a educational choir for children from Bethlehem and Hebron with a primary goal of providing opportunities for intercultural exchange.

I found it hard to believe that Kamal and his family would be able to host over 45 of us for dinner in his house, but it actually wound up being easier to fit all of us comfortably in a large dining room than it was to fit our tour bus through the narrow streets of Bethlehem.

Kamal was a wonderfully gracious host who fed us well, offered us seemingly bottomless bottles of Palestinian wine, and used the time to share more with us about the history of his family, his own journey inside and outside of the West Bank and both his deep concerns for the Palestinian people and his genuine hope for a future beyond the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

This was the joyful feast of the people of God, words we often say when inviting the faithful to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper - An abundant meal, offered in gracious hospitality with the opportunity for genuine connection all wrapped in a vision of a world at peace.

As we continue this fall in our series on defining words of faith, it is appropriate on World Communion Sunday to consider the word sacrament. Theologians will describe what makes something a sacrament in different ways. In the 5th Century Augustine described them as an outward sign of an inward and invisible grace. As Presbyterians we claim the Sacraments as signs of the real presence and power of Christ in the Church and symbols of God's action. Through the Sacraments, God seals believers in redemption, renews our identity as people of God, and marks us for service.

Reformer John Calvin along with others of the Protestant movement wrote that one of the marks of the true Church was that it was a place where the sacraments were rightly administered. If you even spent a few minutes reading through the guidance that is given to us as a presbyterian congregation in our Book of Order and the historic texts of our Book of Confessions as to the technical ways that we are and are not supposed to celebrate the sacraments, you can easily imagine the many and various disagreements about what it means to celebrate Communion and Baptism decently and in order.

When Paul wrote that first letter to the Church in Corinth this was one of his primary concerns, that the sacrament was not being rightly administered - that this particular church was not celebrating in a way that fulfilled the intention of the Lord's Supper. Of course, we remember that when we say the Corinthian church, we are talking about a house church, and when we are talking about the Lord's Supper, we are talking about an Agape meal that was shared by early Christians when they gathered.

Today we might imagine a house church as being an intimate gathering of believers but in all likelihood the church in Corinth was a relatively large group of folks from diverse backgrounds and statuses in the community.

Restricted to a home because at this point there were no public spaces dedicated to Christian worship, it fell to the wealthier Christians

in the community to open up their homes to the “church” for the gathering of the people. It would have been typical in a Roman villa for the dining room to be set up specifically for entertaining close friends. Called a triclinium, most of the room would have been taken up with a “u” shaped table and couches where the men would recline with one another in the meal, just as we would have imagined Jesus reclining with his disciples in their meals together – really the perfect size room for 13 men to dine together.

That would mean that the rest of the church members would be forced to gather outside in the villa’s courtyard. Jerome Murphy O’Connor, a leading scholar in the historical Jesus movement, wrote about how our better understanding of this architecture helps us understand the problems that they had in the early church.

“The mere fact that all could not be accommodated in the triclinium meant that there had to be an overflow into the courtyard. It became imperative for the host to divide his guests into two categories; the first class believers were invited into the triclinium while the rest stayed outside. The host invited into the triclinium his closest friends among the believers, who would have been of the same social class. The rest could take their places in the courtyard where conditions were greatly inferior. Those in the triclinium would have reclined, whereas those in the courtyard were forced to sit or squat.”

Paul’s concerns about whether or not the Corinthians were faithfully celebrating the sacrament had nothing to do with the type of bread or wine they used, whether they ripped and dipped or passed plates of small pieces of bread and little cups, or even who recited and reenacted the words of Jesus Christ from Maundy Thursday.

No Paul’s greatest concern was that the church wasn’t celebrating the Lord’s Supper together. Some were eating their fill before the whole church had arrived, some were given places of honor while others were forced to sit outside with animals. Later on in this same letter he writes, “So then my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait

for one another.” For Paul, what made the sacrament holy was that everyone had a place, that everyone received their portion, and that everyone was recognized as equal members of the community.

One of my favorite classes in seminary was my class on the sacraments, especially the days when we would practice the physical movements of baptism and communion. How to transfer an often-overdressed baby from a parent and then back to a parent. How to perforate a sourdough loaf so that it looks like it was effortlessly broken as the words of institution were spoken. I remember being taught that as we prayed over the water before a baptism that we should run a hand through the water so that the people might hear the movement of the spirit. We were taught that when we broke the bread or poured the cup to hold the elements as high as we could so that the entire congregation could view them clearly.

These sacred words and holy signs that pastors have been entrusted with always seemed to be the minutia that Calvin must have been talking about when he commanded the church to do the sacraments the right way. But the longer I have been a pastor, I find that I am much more in line with the Apostle Paul when I consider the moment and the acts that make the sacrament sacramental.

For me is not just when we say the prescribed words or move our hands in a certain way. The sacrament becomes holy, the spirit is present, in the act of sharing them with one another.

It is not just that moment of placing the water on the head of a child, but that moment of recognition that comes from that intimate act, the speaking of a name, the brightness in their eyes, a small hand outstretched often to touch the water for themselves.

In just a few moments the bread will be broken, and the cup poured. Prayers spoken giving thanks for God creating us and loving us as God’s people, saving us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and empowering us every day as individuals and a church to

seek justice and reconciliation in the world. Ancient words and actions remembered and rehearsed again. But it is in the intimate moment of offering the bread and the cup to one another that we experience the movement of the spirit among us.

It is actually one of my favorite and sometimes most stressful parts of celebrating the sacrament of communion as a community - to be able to speak the name of the one to whom I am offering the bread and the cup. It is mostly stressful because of all of the other things happening all at the same time, that can cause me to mis-remember a name. In talking about it this week, Agnes confessed that once she even blanked on her own husband's name when he came forward to receive communion.

But there is something holy experienced, when I am able to catch someone's eye, speak their name, and then offer them a gift that embodies all of the love and the sacrifice, the abundant mercy, and genuine invitation of God. I attempt to do it as much as my feeble brain will allow me when we celebrate communion in the Chapel and worshipers are invited to come forward to receive the bread and the cup. It wasn't until we celebrated communion in that style here in the sanctuary last fall, after so many months of being apart, that I experienced a renewed sense the sacredness of communion when I could serve and speak the names of many who I had been apart from for so long.

It is that moment of recognition - of knowing and being known, of welcoming and being welcomed, of offering these signs of grace and willingly receiving it that makes them holy. It is exactly what was missing in the church in Corinth.

The day after our full day in Bethlehem with Kamal and the Amwaj choir, we had another long day of touring in Jerusalem, including visits to Gethsemane, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Wailing wall, and the Old City, with another afternoon of rehearsals and concerts - this time with the Magnificat Institute as well as the Amwaj Choir.

In order to make a combined choir event like that happen, our tour company and the choir had to apply for permits for the Palestinian children and their leaders to pass through the checkpoints in the separation wall. It was only a five-mile journey, but for a significant number of children in the choir it was the very first time they had ever been allowed to cross into Israel.

As we made our way single file through the very narrow and cobblestone alleyways lined with vendors in the old city, I found myself towards the back of our group, looking at my feet to be sure I didn't fall, when I heard a wave of what can only be described as joy when our long group of 45 intersected with the children of the Amwaj choir making their way the opposite direction. Squeals of delight as singers in both choirs recognized each other. Hands were clasped, hugs and high fives were exchanged. Many a selfie was taken together. If you join us following worship for the presentation on the trip, you will have the chance to see video footage of all of it.

It was a sacred moment of recognition. An outward expression of an invisible grace that brought us together in this serendipitous way. Now I am not suggesting that what happened in that moment was technically a sacrament.

But what I would hope, is that when we share the sacraments with one another, today and each time that we gather at the table or at the font, that we bring that level of delight, a wide-eyed spark of recognition, a joy in coming together with one another across differences and diversity, grateful to God for his mercy and for the community and its grace. Amen.