

Hearing the Gospel lesson read, you can appreciate why the early Christians were accused of being cannibals. "They who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life...For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed." (John 6:54-55) Early Christians gathered together to eat a love feast and remember their Lord, who had told them to break bread and drink from the cup in remembrance of him. Eating together was a characteristic of early Christian gatherings. When they were Jewish Christians, they worshipped in the temple or synagogue, and came together as Christians to pray together, support one another, and eat together. The act of eating together gradually became known as Communion, and the central act of worship.

Last week I concluded the series on the way out of the human dilemma of sin and death. God has provided the way out through Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit leads us out and empowers us to follow. While we wait for the final realization of God's triumph in history, we are called to be the church--the body of Christ--and model the new life, model the way out. What we do as a church is share our gifts in ministry and support one another in love. I concluded the sermon last week by pointing out there is something else we do together in the church, something that might well be our most important and significant act; namely, the sacrament of Holy Communion. And then we feast.

In one sense the act of worship, and especially the sacrament of Communion, re-enacts the gospel. The service of Communion celebrates God's gift of salvation, models the way out, and provides the setting and opportunity for you to experience the forgiveness, conversion, and empowerment of the Holy Spirit in your life. What we do together in Communion is for us as individuals, for us as a church, and for the world--the broken world, the world caught in the dilemma of sin and death.

The bread is broken on behalf of a broken world. The body of our Lord was broken. Jesus who came to seek and to save that which was lost was crucified. Our suffering, hatred, evil, pain, and offenses are all gathered together in Jesus, broken with him, and now the broken bread and spilled cup become symbols and a means of forgiveness, deliverance, resurrection, new hope, and second chances. We come with broken lives on behalf of a broken world. The bread is broken, and the crumbs fall on the floor. The "crumbiness" of our lives, broken relationships, shattered visions and dreams, are symbolized by the crumbs on the floor. But we kneel in the midst of the mess, we kneel in the midst of messy lives and a broken world, and receive the forgiveness, the wholeness, the healing of Christ.

The many partitions that separate us from one another, the partitions that separate people from people, the partitions that separate us from being our best selves, the partitions that separate races, cultures, religions, nations are all broken here in the embracing, love of God.

At this table we, the church, are strengthened to carry out Christ's mission. At this table we are built up for service. Here in the church we discover our gifts and are called to be prophets, preachers, teachers, healers, administrators, servants. The body of Christ becomes alive; we each find our place and carry out our tasks. When we separate we each will go out as witnesses of what we have heard, to bless others because we have been blessed, to forgive others because we have been forgiven, to offer ourselves in service because we have shared in the sacrifice of Jesus, and to love

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others with the love with which we are loved. For, you see, what is served on the table does not belong to the church. We received so that we might share. When we as a church try to monopolize the grace of God, we cease to be a church and become a closed, exclusive community which is not a church but a club. Therefore, we believe in Open Communion; the grace of God is freely available to everyone. Christ died for the world, not just for the church, and certainly, not just for some particular denomination.

As we prepare for and experience Communion, communion with Christ, communion with one another, communion with our ourselves (the best in ourselves), we pray, "Maranatha." Maranatha, the prayer of the early church, the prayer which ends the Bible, Revelation 22:20, is "Come, Lord Jesus!" Come, Lord Jesus, maranatha, come to our table this morning; come to our needy world; come at the end of history. We gather in the mystery of our faith which we will proclaim in the liturgy: CHRIST HAS DIED, CHRIST IS RISEN, CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN. Come, Lord Jesus!

Will you come to the table this morning as you are--broken or whole, empty or full, weary or energetic, sad or happy, sick or well, needy or satisfied? Come and offer yourself as a sacrifice to God which we learned last week means to offer yourself in humble service to God. Pray, "Here I am, Lord, use me as you will, forgive me and cleanse me, empower me. Oh, come, Lord Jesus."