

HOLY COMMUNION: SACRIFICE OR TABLE FELLOWSHIP?

Luke 14: 12-24

Holy Communion. Today we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. And even though every church in Christianity celebrates Holy Communion, understandings of Holy Communion can be quite different. Now whatever I'm going to say here, please don't hear it as making one understanding superior to another. Different understandings don't mean one is right and one is wrong or one is better and one is worse. As we are each different human beings, the varieties of Christianity also reflect our diversity. The key mark of a legitimate Christianity is love: the love of God in Christ and through the Spirit. That's it. Everything else can differ in style and form and even understanding.

However, different understandings help us appreciate different ways God can be among us. For instance, some forms of Christianity see Holy Communion primarily as a sacrifice. God sacrifices God's self in Jesus on the cross, and every time we share in Holy communion, we partake of the broken body and life of Christ through the bread and wine. In some traditions, in fact, every time the priest breaks the bread and pours the wine into the cup and then blesses or consecrates it, Christ is sacrificed for participants and that's the way God's love is received. It's called a "Mass."

This is not our understanding as Protestants. Here, we put a different emphasis when we celebrate Holy Communion. Here, we emphasize the table and the sharing of food in a meal with family and friends. While the 'sacrificial' emphasis on Holy Communion calls the table an 'alter', we Protestants simply call it a table, and we imagine a table we would sit around and break bread together. And while the sacrificial understanding of Holy Communion comes from biblical practices of sacrifice in the temple, the fellowship around the table understanding of Holy Communion comes from the biblical practice of table fellowship Jesus enjoyed and talked about in his teaching and parables. In fact, one of the early ways Holy Communion was practiced in the early church was as part of a larger potluck fellowship Christians shared when they gathered for church. They called it a "love feast." Isn't that a wonderful name for table fellowship? A love feast. Imagine calling the fellowship you have with family and friends: a love feast. How would that shape the understanding of what you are doing together when sharing a meal?

Well, but there's more. Who is included and welcome at the table? Do you need a special invitation or ticket? Is there an entrance fee? Do you need to belong to the right group culturally, socially or morally? Who would Jesus invite to a meal where the focus is on sharing food, drink and love that is his life?

Well, our scripture reading this morning is a challenging one in this regard. Jesus is invited to a banquet where there are important people of the community present. Isn't it an honour that they have also invited Jesus? And yet, for all his gratitude being at this meal, Jesus makes a criticism directed at many gathered there with him. Who has been invited and who has not? People who matter, people with some influence, standing, respectability and money are there. People who have little, are dirty, disabled and broken in some more visible way are not. What kind of community meal is this?

"Well, Jesus, we can do our little bit of charity and volunteering here and there, but do we have to reach out and include those we'd rather keep at a distance? What do they have to offer us back? We give and we serve but now it's time for us to receive some gratitude and a pat on the back, and we want to gather with those who are like us. We need to feel comfortable and at home. Why have to enjoy an intimate meal with those less palatable who are not like us?"

Well, but Jesus recognizes this exactly to be the problem among his people. Until they and we understand that family is a constantly evolving and growing thing, we will never fully understand what Holy Communion as Jesus institutes it is really all about. And so, rather than just tell them directly what's wrong with the picture he sees around him of those invited and gathered, and those not, Jesus tells them a parable. And parables are interesting stories, because you only get the meaning of a parable according to how personally you understand it. If you're shut off from the meaning, it's simply a quirky story. If you are vulnerable and open to what it may mean for you, it strikes right at your heart.

So, what's the parable about then? To help us understand what it may mean, let me tell you a story of what this parable came to mean for me personally some time ago. I had just started ministry in a new church. The Christian Education team and I came up with a new idea for Advent. We planned to host a breakfast and include an Advent program for all ages on a Saturday morning. We did a lot of planning, set up and decorating ahead of time. We planned the menu - eggs, sausages, bagels, muffins and all the fixings. We got to the church early morning and started cooking and prepping. We had a great program for the children and the adults ready to go. But then, 9am came around, and nobody had showed up. Had we not advertised well enough? Had people not indicated their interest in coming out? As the lead minister I felt totally responsible for the success of this initiative. If it failed this early in my ministry there, what else could go wrong? Every minute past 9am felt like an hour. I began to sweat. People were standing behind the counter ready to serve. The food was ready. Everything was ready...

And then, I heard the familiar shuffling sound of one of the long-time members named Keith. Keith lived in one of our supportive housing units attached to the church. Keith had had a stroke as a child and this had left him partly affected in his brain function and physical mobility. He was quite independent and yet he walked with a distinct limp and shuffling of his feet. But

you could count on Keith to be present at any event where there was food. And so it was, Keith was to be our first attendee and participant in our first ever Advent breakfast!

Well, as soon as Keith walked in he was showered with attention! I myself welcomed him in. I took him to our food counter and showed him all the hot food ready to go. I asked him if he wanted to be served, and he did. We poured on the food, got him some hot coffee and juice, seated him and served him. A number of us just crowded around and Keith was treated like royalty. It was hilarious actually, but it was also precious. Shouldn't every human being be treated this way?

Thankfully, others began to arrive in the next while and we ended up having a wonderful event to be repeated yearly. But that experience left a huge mark on me and it gave new meaning to this parable Jesus tells. The last shall be first and the first shall be last... Ok. So what's this parable about more specifically?

Let's begin by reviewing the story. We're told someone of means wants to host a lavish dinner and invites many people to it. Who are they? Well, when the time is approaching the host sends out his servants to welcome the guests personally. Shockingly though, or maybe not so shockingly, those invited make excuses for why they cannot make it. They have busy lives. They have business to attend to and other social functions. When you have a life and money to make a life, you're busy. This may be a great banquet you're invited to, but there's other priorities, opportunities and options out there. Wow!

Ok, so the servants return and tell their boss all that's happened. Nobody is interested in coming. They're all too busy doing other things or making excuses anyway. Wow! The boss is understandingly upset. In fact, he's furious at being so dishonoured. Is this the substance of appreciation in his relationships and within his social circle and from his friends?!

Well, he tells his servants, I've got a lot of food ready to go. Go out and find people who are not so busy with other engagements and business. Maybe they'll appreciate a hot meal and wonderful entertainment. And so, the servants go out, we're told, into the streets and lanes of their town. They invite those who are poor and disabled in some way, left destitute and discarded.

But after they have done all this, they report to their boss: "We have done all you have asked but there's still room for more people." Well, their boss tells them, go out again and scour the back alleys and byways. Find anyone and everyone and "compel" them to come in so that all the seats around the table may be full. Now the word "compel" in the original (*anagazon*) suggests desperation and pleading. Imagine, pleading with people on the street to come. Is this humiliatingly embarrassing, or is it something else. Suddenly, those who don't matter, matter a lot. Every person and every spot must be filled. Every human being no matter who they are,

matters. You are special. You are precious. I need you. Please come! What do I have to do to get you to come? I'll do anything!

Imagine if we were all treated this way. Well, some of us may feel we are treated this way. We are important in our social circles. We're never short of invitations from family & friends, workplaces, neighbours. We matter. But think about how vulnerable we would be if we had to move because we lost everything or we became sick or depressed or divorced or we came out of the closet and our usual circle of family and friends were less inclined to have us around...

Whatever the reason, what is the point Jesus is trying to make? Is our table not only open to everyone, but intentionally so? Do we actually think about who we welcome and invite around our table and do we think about what it would mean to make it a welcoming and safe space for them? Do we know them and take the time to get to know them and make it special for them?

Well, things have changed for the church in North America and the further north you go the less church is something people in general prioritize as essential to their lives. People may claim to be spiritual in some way but is spiritual community a meaningful priority? The traditional generational group of mostly white Anglo-Saxon hetero-normative Protestants that have been the bedrock of our churches in Canada, are less and less interested in Christian community. In the meantime all kinds of other folk, newer to Canada or more marginalized within our communities and urban centres, are less busy or engaged with social and commercial lives. The same people who would have crowded around Jesus are increasingly outside of our doors waiting for a welcome if we become intentional in welcoming them in. Yes it's different. But imagine the richness of diversity and the changing understanding of family and community we are being called to by the Spirit!

Who comes to share Holy Communion around our table which is the table of Christ? Do we welcome this as the work of the Spirit, or will we, like many churches around us, continue to marginalize ourselves and grieve the loss of our traditional stock of churchgoers?

May we as church continue to grow in ways the Spirit is calling us to grow. Do we have a choice? Yes we do. We can say no, or we can say yes and continue to explore what the yes of inclusion, welcome and accessibility means.

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, come, and take us where you will. May our table be a place of welcome for your people, wherever they come from, and may we treat them with the welcome all your children deserve. May we learn in a whole new way what family means. Amen.