



LET US PRAY – REFLECTIONS ON THE EUCHARIST

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During this Year of the Eucharist, I offer a series of articles on Eucharistic Spirituality: Source of Life and Mission of our Church. Article #6, *Jesus' Meal Practice and Eucharist*.

This article explores Jesus' meal practice and its connection with Eucharist. We begin with three questions

- ***In what context is it helpful to see the Last Supper?***
- ***In Jesus' time, what cultural values were associated with dining, and how did Jesus deal with these?***
- ***What does "Do this in memory of me" mean?***

The Context of the Last Supper. New Testament scholars remind us that the Last Supper is most helpfully seen in connection with everything in Jesus' life that precedes it (including all accounts of table dining), as well as in connection what follows that meal, namely his passion and resurrection (and meal accounts in those stories).

From the beginning, Christians thought of the eucharist as a 'gospel event', meaning that they thought of the eucharist as a compendium of the whole gospel story. Sometimes, today, we think of the eucharist as an isolated event in Jesus' life, disconnected from his ministry and separate from the whole gospel. We can focus on eucharist as the Last Supper and Jesus' words at that Supper, paying little attention to the context of that meal in the entire gospel (what happened before it; what happened after it).

Clearly, for Luke, the Last Supper is the most important meal with Jesus in the whole gospel, but, as Eugene LaVerdiere has pointed out, *it is not the only meal*. It was the last in a long series of suppers together, and it was the first of a new series, anticipating the day of fulfillment when Jesus would eat and drink in the kingdom of God.

LaVerdiere also underscores that this climactic meal of Jesus' life was *part of his life and ministry, not separate from it*. It recapitulates all the previous meals with Jesus, while also belonging to Jesus' risen life and the life of the church – even foreshadowing a heavenly banquet.

The meaning of eucharistic dining, then, is, infused with the cumulative meaning of all the meals with, the journeys of, and the teachings by Jesus. (LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God*, pp. 23-24)



For an example of this, let's look at the gospel of Luke in detail, which scholars jokingly say you can eat your way through, because it has so many meals. Ten, to be exact, starting with the banquet in Levi's house and ending with a meal in Jerusalem before the ascension. One of those ten meals tells the story of the Last Supper.

The gospel of Luke was written in the 80s for communities established in the 50s and 60s during Paul's missionary journeys. Luke weaves the story of Jesus into a description of journeys – and meals on those journeys...meals taken by Jesus with his disciples, the Twelve, tax collectors, scribes, and a host of others. Meals often appear to be the most privileged place for Jesus' teaching, including teaching *about* meals.

Laverdiere notes that Luke presents Jesus on these journeys as prophet, as Christ, and as Lord. Prior to the passion, the emphasis is on Jesus as prophet. At the Last Supper, the emphasis is on Jesus as Christ. And on the first day of the week, the emphasis is on Jesus as Lord (risen and glorified).

Those who eat with Jesus the prophet accept being challenged by him and his prophetic message. Three of these prophetic meals relate eucharist to three basics of christian life: the call to discipleship, the inclusiveness of the church community, and the church's mission to gather the hungry for the breaking of the bread. Four other prophetic meals concern issues in ministry and church life: service, inner purification, attitudes toward oneself and others, and the gift of salvation and behavior that flows from that.

Those who dined at the Last Supper with Jesus the Christ are challenged to be transformed by his death and resurrection and, in living that, to transform the world. The eucharist is the memorial of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. Initiated into that first of all through baptism, we, who are Jesus' companions, continue in it to be transformed in Christ's Passover. The climactic meal of Jesus' prophetic ministry challenges us to live out our baptismal commitment as individuals and as the community of Jesus' disciples.

Those who dine with Jesus the Lord are challenged to recognize the risen Lord in dialogue, in sharing of self, in sacramental presence of bread broken and cup shared, and in the person of the stranger. They are further challenged to recognize their need to break bread in solidarity with Jesus and to accept the call to universal mission,

extending Christ's welcome to all (irrespective of race, sex, ethnicity, nationality, or social class).

Now, each of Luke's meal stories addresses a particular question, but all were written as part of a larger story. In that sense, each has a deeper meaning.

For example, the dinner at the home of Simon, the Pharisee, (Lk. 7:36-50), taken in itself, points out what a local sinful woman's lavish welcome of Jesus (bathing his feet with her tears, drying them with her hair, kissing them, then anointing them with ointment) says, and what the host's contrasting lack of welcome says, about love and forgiveness. It's a touching, moving story, part of the meal story.

But, taken in the wider context of the entire gospel, that meal shows how the community of Jesus, founded on the Twelve, needs to be open to both men *and women*, and how *this* affects the community and its meals.



The eucharist, you see, can't be isolated from the rest of Jesus' life and ministry. La Verdere makes this point: "The origins of the eucharist *lie in a long and complex series of events that has the...Lord's Supper as their climax*, and the origins of the eucharist also include post-resurrection meals that flow from the...Lord's Supper." (*Ibid.*, p. 24)

Eucharist is thus intimately linked to the whole gospel and, indeed, to every aspect of Christian living.

Now, for the second question: ***what cultural values were associated with dining in Jesus' time, and how did Jesus deal with these?***

To speak of table is to speak of social structures and relationships. In Jesus' time, table-companionship gave a group its identity, criteria for membership, and ways of achieving status and power.

In the ancient Mediterranean world, huge priority was put on class and bureaucracy, honor and wealth. Social control was maintained, further, by a system of patronage, rooted in the ideology of shame and honor.

Banqueting in this world was characterized by such features (deemed highly important socially) as posture, location, invitation, rankings at table, washings, prayers, and the sequence of courses (the more important guests being served first, for example). Meals were about power, strategy, and social relations (never simply about food). (I chuckle today when I see on CNBC a midday program called "Power

Lunch”.... Not much has changed since Jesus’ time!)

Jesus negated the hierarchical and patronal normalcies of Jewish religious practice and of Roman power. He stood for the conviction that no power play exists between divinity and humanity, between humanity itself. Jesus announced that the relation between God and humans no longer needs to be mediated, that it’s a done deed. The celebration begins at a table where all are equal, and continues in lives lived wholly as justice and mercy.



This table-centered vision of Jesus unfolded in a variety of strategies. One was his rejection of existing social and religious systems, and the repudiation of his culture’s manifold opportunities for wealth and oppression. He and his followers pronounced the Temple and its priesthood irrelevant. They were critical of the family system of the day, which depended on patriarchy and privilege.

Another strategy was Jesus’ choice to live as a wanderer – a practice that unsettled his contemporaries (Tent City people unsettle us, too!). He and his followers adopted having no settled home as a way of life - a way of life that embodied their vision of a new society based on unbrokered egalitarianism.

Further, Jesus recognized that *all* who need healing have a gift to offer the healer, that the act of healing involves blessings on both sides. He denied the connection his contemporaries made between sin and sickness.

Jesus acted to liberate persons from bondage to powerful oppression (human or inhuman). His ministry of shared-table companionship required his followers to let go of power (not even to have gold or silver, traveling bag, change of shirt, or sandals...not even a walking stick (Mt. 10:8-10]) and to allow people to be equal in spiritual and material resources.

Jesus sat at table, Nathan Mitchell has said, “not as the charming, congenial, ringleted centerpiece of a Rembrandt painting, but as a vulnerable vagrant willing to share potluck with a household of strangers.” (*Eucharist as Sacrament of Initiation*, p.89) Jesus’ table habits challenged the table as the place to establish social rankings and hierarchy, status and power. And so he ate with outcasts and sinners. He ate with *anyone*, challenging his system of social relations. His table-companionship blurred the distinction between host and guest, need and plenty. It made the last first, and the first last.

Jesus proposed that a meal with unconditional acceptance and mutual service outweighs all other cultural and religious considerations. See how this is true, in a climactic and iconic way, at the Last Supper. At that meal, there were no autocrats.

Jesus, Mark says, *took, blessed, broke* and *gave* the bread. Whatever food was available was given *to all*. No hierarchy of favorites to be fed first or more.

Further, the first pair of words (*took, blessed*) belongs to masters and autocrats, whereas the second pair (*broke, gave*) belongs to the work of servants and scullery maids. Jesus takes on the role of *female* work by *breaking* and *giving* the bread.

Finally, all twelve drink of the same cup. “Cup” is a code word in Mark for Jesus’ and the community’s passion and suffering. Table in Mark is *truly* egalitarian: the life and death of each is inextricably bound with the life and death of all. (See Mitchell, *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96)



You see how Jesus’ table ministry was a strategy for rebuilding human community on principles radically different from those of his surrounding social and religious culture.

A similar strategy for recreating the human community undergirds the process that leads us followers of Jesus from water bath to eucharistic dining in the assembly of believers.

And this brings me to my third question: ***what does “Do this in memory of me” mean?*** We find this memento-directive only in Luke 22:19 and in 1 Cor. 11:24-25.

The question is: *what* is it that we’re commanded to repeat. The immediate response might be that we’re commanded to repeat Jesus’ gestures of taking, blessing, breaking, and giving. But it is not quite so simple.

We can distinguish three levels of meaning in the command. One concerns remembering the Passover of Jesus as the new Passover. Another focuses on the sharing of ourselves as Jesus shared himself. And the third focuses on table-

companionship that reflects Jesus’ call to egalitarian relationships and unencumbered service.

The *first level of meaning* springs from the context of this command in Luke’s gospel: it’s found in the account of the Last Supper...and the Last Supper starts the Passion narrative.

“Jesus celebrates the Passover meal,” Joseph Fitzmeyer remarks, “and reinterprets it, sharing bread and wine with his apostles, giving these elements a new meaning, and instructing them to repeat such a meal in memory of him in future times.” (*The Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 2, p. 1356)

Raymond Brown and other biblical scholars concur with Fitzmeyer that the feast of Passover, when Jesus ate the meal with his apostles, had a remembrance motif, drawn from Deuteronomy: “Remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt all the days of your life” (Deut. 16:3) They also point out that for Christians, this was shifted to a remembrance of Jesus.



Fitzmeyer writes: “As Jesus had substituted himself for the Passover lamb, so the memento of him is to replace the anamnesis (memorial) of the Passover itself.” First Corinthians makes it clear this is not a mere recollection of Jesus or his gestures, but a re-presenting of him and his act at the Last Supper to the awareness of the apostles: “Continually do this in order to bring me to mind” (*Ibid.*, pp. 1401-1402). Remember my Passover as the *new* Passover.

A second level of meaning adds a deeper interpretation, connected with the sharing of ourselves in love. It is *we* who are transformed at eucharist to become the People of the new Passover. *We* become the Body and Blood of Christ. *We*, then, must pour ourselves, out as Jesus has poured himself out for us. Eugene LaVerdiere touches on this in his commentary. The Lord’s Supper is a liturgical event anchored in Jesus’ Passover.

“Commanded by Christ to do this in his memory, the participants are asked to renew Christ’s thanksgiving and his sharing among themselves. The two, thanksgiving and sharing are inseparable. There is no genuine thanksgiving without sharing, and no real sharing without thanking God.” (*Dining in the Kingdom*, p. 138)

Henri Nouwen expresses it descriptively: Because we are the Body of Christ, we are, he says, “fashioned by the Spirit of love. It manifests itself in very concrete ways: in forgiveness, reconciliation, mutual support, outreach to people in need, solidarity with all who suffer, and an ever-increasing concern for justice and peace.” (*With Burning Hearts*, p. 76)

A third level of meaning is found in the conviction that the command leads to table-companionship expressed in egalitarian relationships and Jesus’ unique way of service. Nathan Mitchell espouses this interpretation, contending that ultimately Jesus’ mandate to ‘do this in memory of me’ means this: Free yourself from the compulsion to control persons, places, or events. Recall that Jesus practiced table-companionship with anyone, eating anything – rather than the table companionship of his culture, which was based on dependency, rank, status, obligation, and control.

Thus, Jesus invites inclusivity: let your table be as inclusive as God's mercy, welcoming those for whom there is not room at any other table.

Reading the Last Supper accounts in light of all Jesus' earlier meals with friends and foes, and remembering that eucharistic origins lie in all those events wherein Jesus satisfied hunger, announced the joy of God's arrival in the present, and provided healing and hope for the poor and the needy, Mitchell offers this meaning to Jesus' memento-directive: "Make your eucharistic table a place of lavish abundance and of extravagant service, where the tired, the poor, the hungry, and all who are driven by despair and need may find real food, real rest, real comfort, real nurture." (*Ibid.* p. 103)



These are provocative thoughts on Jesus' meal practice and what it might tell us about eucharistic dining.

On the one hand, they may lead us to wonder whether, as perhaps we saw in the article on a history the history of the Mass, our essentially *cultic* sense of eucharist has not blinded us to its broader and more basic meaning. As christian history unfolded, attention shifted. Jesus' focus on a meal practice that emphasized inclusivity, egalitarianism, and abundance was replaced by a focus on Jesus himself. The bread-breaker became the bread-broken.

Concern about the bread broken and other cultic moments overshadowed concern for gathering for the meal and for feeding the hungry. "Institution of the eucharist", a phrase not used until the ninth and eleventh centuries when controversies arose about the real presence, came to overshadow what Jesus *did* at the Last Supper. What he *said* at that meal was deemed more important than what he *did*.

Gradually, the *community* meal (joyful assembly, instruction, fasting, and care of the needy) was deemed less important than a *cultic* meal (with emphasis on bread and cup as Christ's body and blood.)

On the other hand, we affirm over and over again that we are made who we are by taking and blessing, breaking and giving the bread and by sharing the cup *in his memory* until he comes again. We affirm that the *doing* of this in faith, the meal practice, is what is preeminent...and shapes us into who we are.

We stand in the footsteps of our ancestors in faith, who, fifty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, came together on the Lord's Day to do this. In the world where Paul catechized – what we now call Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus - they assembled on the first day of the week to celebrate Christian Passover: to herald the

new creation, and to announce the kingdom of God. We do the same today, as we come together at the table of the Lord.

“Blessed is the one who dines in the kingdom of God”, a guest exclaimed at a dinner where had Jesus gently invited his table companions invite “beggars and the crippled, the lame and the blind. (Lk. 14:25)

Blessed are we who dine in that kingdom!

