

The Heritage of Holy Communion
1 Corinthians 11:23-26

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For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you 1 Cor. 11:23

There is a history that gathers every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The shapers of this church and our experience of it and who passed along its meaning to us are part of this moment. They are present by way of named memorials. The Communion table is a memorial to Barbara Zingg. The white cloth over the Communion table is a memorial to Lester Dettwiler. Gladys Behnke saw to it that it was washed and ironed long before it ever got dirty or wrinkled. I am sure the Communion plates and trays are memorials, too. They come from before my time, but those names are written in the record somewhere. Then we can think of all the hands that have handled these plates and trays – the hands of Communion servers like Sue Rotar, Chris Richards, Bill Thiede; the hands of Chancel Committee people like Frank and Weltha Mackler who cleaned and put away the Communion service when worship was over. And of course there are the spiritual fingerprints of those whose hands touched these plates and trays in the pews as they received them and passed them along to their neighbors – Lowell and Arlien Steckelberg, Pearl and LaVerne Hagemann, Harland and Sylvia Dahlk, Ethel Gust, Mathilda Gust, Frank and Hazel Braudt, and a whole record book of names. This history that gathers every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion is not simply a Verona history. The layout I have used in the bulletin for the Communion Liturgy for 39 years – 30 here and 9 in Belvidere – goes back to my childhood and the one used in my home church in Huntley.

The Apostle Paul was one of the first to speak of the history that gathers at the Communion table. Before the biographies of Jesus that we call the Gospels were penned, Paul wrote to the Corinthians and reminded them of his ministry among them. “I received from the Lord,” he said, “what I also handed on to you.” And he went on to tell what happened in the Upper Room on the night Jesus was betrayed. Communion is a history that contains a meaning and a message and a mystery. That meaning, message, and mystery are received and handed on, received and handed on, in Communion and in congregational life all as a living heritage. Paul points in particular to the acts of receiving and of passing along what is received.

Holy Communion tells of truth we have received.

Albert Einstein once told a friend of his that he had nothing except what he had received.¹ He was thinking of his abilities as a scientist. Paul would have said the same as a pastor and theologian. He had nothing of his own making to offer. He only had what he had been given. This is especially the case with regard to Communion truth which gathers up all Christian truth. Our faith is something we have received.

¹ Jay E. Adams, *The Homiletical Innovations of Andrew W. Blackwood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 42. The friend was Mrs. Blackwood.

Faith is received first from the Lord. There is a John Irving novel in which a boy asks a pastor if he believes in miracles. The pastor answers that he does and he goes on to say the first miracle he believes in is the miracle of his own faith.² The New England novelist has it right. Faith is a gift. It is not something we can come to on our own.

I have tried over the years to pass on to you what I have learned from the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, the most influential Christian theologian since the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century. Barth said we can no more come to the faith on our own than we can jump over our own shadow.³ He understood – and I think the best of biblical and evangelical theology understands – that the truth of God is not something we derive through reason or deduce from experience. The truth of God can come only through revelation which is God’s declaration of himself.⁴ So faith is received first from the Lord.

Faith is received from the generations that have come and gone before us. John Baillie, Scottish churchman and devotional writer, reminds us that the Christian path is one that is well worn from the footsteps of the generations who have preceded us in the journey of living life under God.⁵ We have what we have of Christian insight because of the likes of Paul, Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, and saints in our own sacred memory who have been our teachers and guides – parents and grandparents and authors who have become our companions and friends through their books. Faith is received from the Lord and from the generations ahead of us.

And faith is received surely from the people around us. I know I have been strengthened in my faith because of you. I have told you before of a time when – for whatever reason I no longer recall – I was in a funk of some kind, down in the dumps, and my faith was fatigued and lethargic. One Sunday Laura Kolden was leading in the pastoral prayer during worship and I was only half-listening. My heart wasn’t in it. She came to the Lord’s Prayer and I decided in my soul I didn’t have the strength to pray it. I was going to stay silent. But then you started to say the Lord’s Prayer. The congregation started praying and the collective voice of the community of faith at prayer was like CPR to my soul. I was lifted in spirit, strengthened, encouraged, and empowered. Faith is something we receive first from the Lord, from the generations ahead of us, and from the people around us.

That is the history that gathers at the Communion Table every time we celebrate this Sacrament.

Holy Communion tells of truth we pass along.

I come back now to the words of my text. Paul says, “I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you” The truth received is meant to be passed along, handed on, and not kept.

² John Irving, *A Prayer for Owen Meany* (New York: William Morrow, 1989), p. 277.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1956), p. 746.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, translated by G. T. Thomson (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 17ff.

⁵ John Baillie, *A Diary of Private Prayer* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1949), p. 25.

There is a page in the Old Testament that tells of a time the city of Samaria was being besieged by an opposing army. The people inside Samaria were starving. There was a tiny group of lepers just outside the city and they were starving, too. They weren't in Samaria or in the camp of the opposing army but they were hard pressed as could be. At last they decided they had nothing to lose if they went to the enemy and appealed for food. The worst that could happen to them was that the enemy might kill them on the spot. But they were going to die of starvation anyway if they stayed where they were. They had nothing to lose. They ventured toward the enemy camp and found it empty! The enemy had left as if in a hurry. And they had left just about everything behind. There was especially their horde of food. The lepers pounced on it. They ate and ate and ate. At last one said to the others, "This isn't right! We should tell the people of this good fortune! We should tell them of their deliverance! We should tell them that the enemy is gone and there is sustenance to be found!" The abundance wasn't just for them. It was meant to be shared (2 Kgs. 7:3ff).

So it is with the mystery, meaning, and message of Holy Communion. It is truth we have received and truth we are meant to share. Altar Communion does not quite show it as much in its symbolism but our usual practice of Pew Communion does show it in acted out symbolism. There is not only the symbolism of the bread and the cup which tell of the Lord's coming to us redemptively, there is also the sharing, the passing of the plates and the trays from one to another and to the next. Communion carries truth we receive and are meant to pass along.

We pass this truth along with reverence. Never do I come to a Communion table without hearing the voice of my professor saying to our worship class in seminary, "Beware of dull familiarity when handling sacred things." We handle these trays and plates once a month and other times as well. It is easy for it to become rote, commonplace, dull with familiarity. Guard against that. Handle these trays and plates with reverence because this just may be the day someone's eyes will open as did those in an Emmaus home (Lk. 24:31) or the day someone will discover, as did Joseph of old, "This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven." (Gen. 28:17) We pass along with reverence what we receive all in the trust that God is active here and now and actively reaching souls.

We pass this truth along with humility as well as reverence. The paragraph that follows what was read to us this morning from 1 Corinthians 11 warns against eating and drinking this Supper in an unworthy manner. That speaks of inner as well as outer decorum. The last thing any one of us should be as we receive and pass along this Sacrament is haughty or arrogant as if we have understanding of all that is transpiring here, as if we deserve the grace we are about to receive, and as if we know who does and does not deserve the grace about to be offered. We are stewards of this mystery. We are servants of this history. Because we know we do not deserve it ourselves but are given it nevertheless in love, we are to handle it with humility and without a spirit of judgmentalism.

We pass this truth along with hope as well as humility and reverence. Sacraments are, by definition, outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual truth. The bread and the cup are tangible, taste-able witnesses to what is spiritual and invisible. There is a page in the Old Testament where the prophet Elijah is exhausted, crestfallen, depressed, and even suicidal. He falls asleep in his forlorn fatigue only to be awakened in a while by an angel who brings him

something to eat and drink to strengthen him for the journey (1 Kgs. 19:6). So we pass these trays and plates all in the hope that our sisters and brothers, fatigued and broken and battered by life, perplexed by problems and difficulties by the number, will find the hand of an angel – Christ himself – bringing them strength for the strain and the spiritual help they need. The movement in the sanctuary at the time of Communion is the movement of acted out hope in the living history of the living God meeting living people.

This is the heritage of Holy Communion. We have what we have received from the Lord, from the generations ahead of us, and from the people around us. And we pass along in reverence, humility, and hope what we have received.

A new history will begin with you and for you at your next Communion service after today. The new history will be unlike today just as today is unlike yesterday. Still it will be filled with the truth that is timeless and it shall be what it has always been – a witness to the age and to the ages. New generations will be strengthened by what we have done here in the years gone by and by what you will do here in the months and years to come. Trust God to give those new generations the truth marvelous and trust the truth marvelous to be uncontainable and passed along.