

This is my Body—the Church

John 2:13-21; I Cor 11:23-29; 12:12-14, 21-26

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What is communion? I have three reflections for you today: 1) on the Cleansing of the Temple story and Christ's body, 2) on Paul's observations on communion and the Christian body, and 3) on how our church body today might celebrate communion in a radically new way.

Reflection #1: Those Galileans! You know, the ones who came marching down here with their slogans – Hosanna in the Highest – Galilean Lives Matter – shutting down our highway, disrupting traffic?! Then they come busting in to the temple, destroying property, shutting down commerce. Who do they think they are? I talked to some of them who were there and the fourth one, John, got all starry-eyed about running around screaming and cracking a whip! That this represented the very first public act of some new, earth-changing ministry. Well if you ask me, they're nothing but a bunch of violent, murderous, *foreign* terrorists...

On the other hand, they were right across the street from the Roman garrison—you know, the one we built slightly taller than the temple to show whose boss?—and our centurians didn't arrest anybody! I guess those Jesus people didn't really break any occupation laws, per se. And they *did* rescue the bodies of those poor sheep, cattle, and doves, who surely would have all been sacrificed in the temple. And they didn't injure anybody--they respected people's bodies even as they nonviolently protested. I suppose as long as they keep it religious and stay away from politics and economics, it's no problem.

But then John said Jesus *did* in fact preach about how we've turned Yahweh's house into a marketplace, and how such vulture capitalism is destroying temple and nation. They can, Jesus claimed, be cleansed again, in a matter of days if people want it, and the temple can truly become not just an exclusive club for the 1-percenters, but a house of prayer for all nations. John says he believes Jesus' body represents the temple, and the disciples are ushering in a new body politic—the upside-down Kingdom—which is even now present and available for *every...body*.

Well now, as everyone knows there's only one body on this earth—Rome. And there is only one person—one body—around these parts who decides what's true and what's not, who *gives* the orders and who carries them out, who is favored and who is brought down, who lives and who dies (just like with our gladiators down there in Caesarea at the Super Bowl—I mean, the Super Coliseum!). And that body is *not* Jesus. It's *not* the Galilean People's Front or whatever they call themselves. That body is *Pontius Pilate*.

So, you all better get your body allegiances sorted out, and fast, if you know what's good for ya!

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Reflection #2: Those Corinthians! You know, those Christians who meet on Sundays down at that house? Who do that bizarre ritual? They re-enact Jesus holding up bread and saying, "This is my body." Then they *eat* it. And some bloody wine, too. It's a sort of ritual cannibalism, I guess a more literal version of when we offer sacrifices to Caesar every year, and to Zeus or whatever god in the mystery religion of your choice. Only the thing is, these Christians have added a *new* god to the official pantheon—Christ! His body is some sort of gory sacrifice, and if you satisfy him by eating the magic death bread and death blood, he'll shower down wealth and good luck onto you! Or something like that—it's a little confusing to me.

Actually, I talked to one of them the other day—Paul. I said, “Hey, what’s up with this dead god you’re eating?” He laughed at me! And then he said, “That’s not what we’re doing. Yes, we are a community that celebrates the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and we re-enact that by quoting Jesus. But when we say “This is my body,” we’re not just talking about the *crucified* body of Christ. We’re re-committing ourselves, through our covenant to God in baptism, to be a part of *the living body of Christ* in the world. Also, when we corporately eat and drink, we demonstrate our discernment as a body of believers. We promise one another that we will care for each another, we’ll suffer and rejoice with each another, we’ll be accountable for our actions and we’ll strive to be in healthy communion with each other. We’ll be nonviolent agents of healing, hope, and transformation, praying for God’s will to be done on earth, as it is in heaven.”

“Okay Paul, so you people are better than all the rest of us because when *you* eat god’s body, you become so pure and holy that you earn a magic ticket to heavenly Mount Olympus!”

“Nope,” Paul said, laughing again. “It’s the opposite. We’re turning upside-down the whole purity and hierarchy-based system of power and privilege. When we celebrate communion, we lift up Jew *and* Greek, free *and* slave, male *and* female, citizen *and* non-citizen, and all in-between. We give preferential option to precisely those bodies that the Empire-enamored spiritualities of our day look down upon as not worthy, respectable, favored, honored, or ‘pure.’ *That’s* our good news!”

“How convenient, Paul. You eat god’s body, then you get to be the self-appointed populist savior of your little cult, promising the moon to all your little people.”

“No, again it’s the opposite,” said Paul, now shaking his head. “Jesus said, ‘This is my body,’ and then washed the disciples’ feet. As the living body of Christ, we don’t have a pope or bishop or board of directors or pastor or professor or president or police force or judge that calls the shots. Yes, of course we have stresses and strains which infect us just like any body politic will experience on occasion. Then we work at healing and making key decisions together as a *body*, reading the scriptures, praying, and discerning together...making judgments about what to say ‘Yes’ to and what to say ‘No’ to. Each person has a voice. Each person is a child of God. No one dominates over the other. Each person is a member of Christ’s body.”

“Sounds good, Paul. But there’s only one body around here who really moves the needle. That’s Zeus, and his son Nero. And Nero has the greatest stock market in history! (Except for that 666-point drop last Friday, but we won’t go into that.) Paul, for your little pacifist “body of Christ” movement, I’ll give you 250 years, max. Then we’ll see how it’s working for ya.”

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Reflection #3: (How about if I just be myself, now?!) You know those folks over at Faith Mennonite? The church down from the Co-op? Ever wonder what they think about the Lord’s Supper? Some college students explained the Eucharist to me the other day like this: “Catholics believe that they are eating the *literal* body and blood of Christ. Protestants believe it’s *only symbolic*—just bread and wine.” That’s one of those times I shake my head and think, “That’s *so* not right, it’s not even wrong.” But anyways, where are the Anabaptists on this issue? What is our sacramental theology? Catholic transubstantiation? Lutheran real presence? Calvinist remembrance? Whose side are we on?

I was stunned recently when I went back and read the earliest manual on Early Church practices—the *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Disciples*. It contains a short liturgy giving us a window into the way the first-century church celebrated communion. You know what? There is not a single reference to sacrifice, or atonement— substitutionary or otherwise—nor any direct

reference to the crucifixion, nor even to communion as a remembrance of the Last Supper! Instead, the central image is of grains that have been brought together into one loaf: “Even as this bread was originally scattered over the hills, and was then gathered together and became one, so let your Church be gathered together into your kingdom.”

Then I remembered that several years ago when we were holding an adult ed. series on Anabaptist theology here at Faith I ran across this 1542 reflection on the Lord’s Supper by Peter Riedeman:

As the bread is made a loaf by the bringing together of many grains, even so we, many human beings, who were scattered and divided...are led by faith into one, and have become one plant, one living organism, and body of Christ... It is sufficiently clear that none other than this alone is Christ’s meaning. [And] for this reason he gives us wine, since many grapes have become one drink... Thus, the partaking of the bread and wine is a sign of the community of Christ’s body.

So in both early Anabaptist and early Christian conceptions of church *we*, as the body of Christ, are the primary referent of the elements of the Lord’s Supper. This understanding of the corporate “*body*” is our key to the meaning of communion.

And this image that we—the church—are grain and grapes, provokes me to put forward two slightly different proposals in relation to how we celebrate the Lord’s Supper today:

First, communion should be an act of invitation, of radical hospitality. The temple shall be a place of prayer for all nations, and the body represents a diversity of gifts, especially of those on the margins whom others reject. Some people seem to be into building walls these days—let’s not build a wall around communion! Let’s not re-enact those episodes of Seinfeld where people nervously line up at the deli counter and the soup Nazi snaps, “No soup for you! No soup for you!” Purity politics is not what we’re about. Some congregations have gone to an “Open Table” approach. Communion in this view symbolizes our solidarity with *all* of God’s people—the whole human body in all its grainy and grapey diversity, no questions asked, period.

Second (and this may or may not be entirely compatible with the first), communion should be for renewing our specific covenant vows together as a visible, gathered local congregation of believers. I value those times, as on retreat or on Maundy Thursday, when communion is more private, where instead of a vague personal or universal sense of connection, we’re saying very concretely, as in footwashing, “I’m bound to *you*, I’m accountable to *you*, sister and brother, in the coming year. I promise to challenge you and to make decisions with you. To be broken with you and to be healed with you. To journey with you and to make peace with you, through thick and thin, no matter how grainy or grapey it gets. To be there as Christ for you and together to grow into Christ’s body with you.

In the final analysis, I don’t know, theologically, if there is *one perfect way* to celebrate the Lord’s Supper. But I do know that we are a people who should never let go of taking radical hospitality seriously *and* taking covenant renewal seriously.

Why? Because, “this is my body.” This is my church. This is you. This is us. Amen.