

Faith Mennonite Church  
August 21, 2011  
Taste & See: God is Good  
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### **Pause before you eat**

*Mark 14:12-24; 1 Corinthians 11: 17-29, 33-34a*

This summer we've been exploring various stories of meals in the Bible, noting God's care for God's people through food. One of the first meals we experienced was the Seder, which memorializes the last supper that the people of Israel ate in Egypt before their exodus from slavery. Today, and each time that we celebrate communion, we remember another last supper, which took place during the Jewish feast of Passover. We remember the last supper that Jesus shared with his disciples before his death.

Most if not all of us have heard the saying: "We are what we eat." Our scriptures this morning, especially Paul's letter to the Corinthians, remind us that "we are *how* we eat." This meal is not just about the bread and cup that remind us and invite us to enter into the mystery of Jesus' death. It's about the way that everyone who partakes comes to the table.

Kathleen Harder was quoted in a *Star Tribune* article earlier this summer that high-lighted the work she has been doing to create procedures to eliminate surgical mistakes. A key procedure is the pause—less than a minute—but just before the surgeon takes the scalpel. The pause provides each member of the surgical team a moment for final review: do we have the right patient, do we have the right procedure, do we have the right limb or organ?

At the last supper, Jesus invited his disciples into such a pause when he broke from the routine words of the Passover celebration and announced that one who was at the table would betray him. We've read this story so often that we don't get the jolt. The Passover celebration was highly ritualized; particular words were spoken and foods eaten in a particular order. I imagine that in the growing tension that surrounded Jesus and his disciples, since they had arrived in Jerusalem, the disciples had been looking forward to celebrating the Passover as an opportunity to put their cares behind them and to sink into a place of ritual calm, a safe place.

But Jesus called for a pause. Passover wasn't just a ritual of remembering something that had happened long ago. Israel was living in a new form of oppression under Roman occupation. Jesus and his disciples were facing the challenge of oppression from the Jewish institutional leaders who wanted to constrain the hope they were planting in people—hope that risked upsetting the uneasy peace those leaders had achieved with the occupation. That challenge had infiltrated into Jesus' intimate circle: one of his own would betray him.

Pause. This Passover meal would be different because Jesus was about to die. The disciples quickly jumped into self-examination or perhaps self-defense: could it be me?, they asked each other. Jesus remained calm. All of his ministry had been a giving up, a dying: each time he healed, forgave, and set people in a new direction, he, in effect, took on their disease, their sin, their death. Now he would show his willingness to give his entire self, his body and blood, in death. The matzah, the bread shared in the Passover meal, had over time, come to represent the lamb. In saying "this is my body," Jesus said, "I am the lamb." And to say "this is my blood" certainly caused another gasp, another pause, for it was against Jewish law to drink blood.

All at once a ritual meal that the disciples knew by heart received a wholly new meaning. The past became the present. Not only was Jesus performing his own death, through the Passover meal, he was, in effect, inviting his disciples to enter that same death. And every time we eat, we are invited to pause to consider that invitation anew: what are the things we are being asked to die to?

The 11<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth suggests that the meaning of this meal isn't simply personal; it's also social. We know from other parts of this letter that this church had some serious problems with order in their communal life and in their worship. This evidently carried over into their observance of the Lord's supper. Our best understanding of communion practices in the first century

church is that communion was practiced frequently and as part of larger, shared meals. Acts 2 refers to the believers gathering daily for breaking bread and prayer. Somehow, in Corinth, meals that included the Lord's supper became segregated, stratified. Some people were eating a lot while others went hungry. Perhaps the folks who brought the most food got to eat first. Whatever was going on caused great pain and consternation to Paul because it didn't replicate in any way the model that Jesus set forth in his last supper.

So Paul called for a pause. Stop, he says, and consider your congregational life. You can't honor Christ and participate in an act of remembrance of his death if you aren't willing to die to your own sinful social stratification. You can't pretend to understand what Jesus lived and taught if you aren't beginning to demonstrate some Christ-like behavior in your life. Pause. Don't come to the table in an unworthy manner.

For many years it was the practice in many Mennonite churches to have communion just twice a year, in spring and fall. For a week or two leading up to this service, which in some cases was a separate evening service in which only members of the local congregation would participate, there was a deliberate time of self-examination. If people realized that they harbored ill will against a fellow member, or if they felt that another member had wronged them, this was the time to seek that person out to offer or ask for forgiveness. It was a time of "resetting the bones," as I recently heard someone describe the process. There was a strong belief that one might be guilty of coming to the table "unworthily" if relationships were not first put right.

Every good practice can have a shadow side. For Mennonites, the practice of confessional preparation sometimes led to a sense that communion was primarily about us and our getting right with others. Or the focus was only on the interpersonal without a recognition of our involvement in social sin. In fact, communion is first of all a celebration of the fact that "while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Communion begins and ends with what God did for us through Jesus. But if the beginning and the end is the self-giving love of God, there is a place in the middle for a pause to ask: is there someone I have wronged? Do I carry resentment that I need to let go of? Are there ways that our communal life is leaving someone out?

There was a piece of paper on each of your seats as you entered this a.m. We are going to take a pause, a few moments in silence to consider these questions before we come to the table. If you'd like to write or draw a picture of a situation or person or event that comes to mind please feel free to do so. You can take these papers as a reminder for prayer or for working at reconciliation, or you can put them in the bowl of water at the time of communion, releasing them to God. Let us pause.

Thank you, O God, for our bread.  
And give bread to those who are hungry,  
And a hunger for justice to those who are fed.  
Thank you, O God, for our bread.