

Undignified Table

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

5th in a six-part series

October 7, 2012

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Galatians 3:23–4:7 (NIV)

²³ Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

¹ What I am saying is that as long as an heir is underage, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. ² The heir is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. ³ So also, when we were underage, we were in slavery under the elemental spiritual forces of the world. ⁴ But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. ⁶ Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

1 Corinthians 10:16–17, 11:17–26 (NIV)

¹⁶ Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

¹⁷ In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸ In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval. ²⁰ So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, ²¹ for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. ²² Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

We are God's people. One people. And we share one table.

What is the nature of our unity and the meaning of the Lord's Supper?

Here are the basics. The Church universal is the body of Christ and the family of Christ. We are comprised of all those who have ever or shall ever place their faith in Jesus Christ. That is the sole thing that we all have in common – our faith in Christ and the obedience true faith entails. Our faith is our "badge of membership" in this family.

All this is true but we often have a hard time understanding and then truly embracing this truth, just as did the believers in Galatia nearly 2,000 years ago. In today's passage from Paul's letter to these Galatian believers, he tries to help them understand and, thus, rejoice in what God has done in and through Jesus. Like all good teachers, Paul uses the analogy of legal adoption to help them grasp the nature of their relationships with one and another and with Christ. We (those have faith in Christ) have been adopted by God as his children and are thus God's heirs.

Heirs of the inheritance

These new Christians (after all, Christianity was brand new at the time) don't really grasp the work that God has done in them. Paul urges them to remember the gifts that God bestowed on them, beginning with the Holy Spirit. Paul's message to them is, "You are new creations; now act like it!"

Paul uses the analogy of minors, heirs, and inheritance to make his point. We *are* in direct relationship with God. We *are* dressed in the adult wardrobe of faith. We *are* in Christ's family. We *are* the descendants of Abraham. We *are* the adult heirs of God and the inheritance due God's heirs is ours.

It is not that we are going to be heirs, we are heirs *now*. We may not act like God's heirs much of the time, but that is who we are. If I had to act like an heir to be an heir . . . well, let's just say that the inheritance would forever elude my grasp.

Paul's point in this passage is larger than just the true identity of the Galatian Christians, though he begins this chapter of the letter by reminding them of their own experience of God's Spirit, which is the evidence and guarantee of their new life in Christ. Nonetheless, many of them still look to the keeping of the Jewish law as the mark of their salvation. They don't fully realize that the arrival of Jesus Christ freed them from the curse of needing to keep a law that they could not keep. Because God gave them the Law, they know sin in a way that other peoples do not.

Paul desperately wants the Galatians to grasp that the Law's rituals and rules and priests and sacrifices was only their temporary custodian. The Law was like a child's nanny. Just as people outgrow their need for a nanny, so, in Christ, believers have no need for the food laws and the rest. Its purpose was accomplished; its time had passed.

In Christ, who was himself born under this temporary custodian so that he could free us from the custodian's care, we, in Peterson's graceful paraphrase from *The Message*, "experience our rightful heritage." And our heritage is that we are new creations, made alive in Christ – formed into one family.

One family and one table

We are one family and we share one dining table. It is the Lord's table and it is the Lord's supper. We call this meal by varied names, but it is still one meal for God's family and for those who are invited to sit at the table as guests.

This meal, often called Holy Communion has, sadly, been a point of much disagreement rancor among Christians for all of the last 2,000 years. The issues of what exactly happens in this meal, what it signifies, who may partake and so on are still debated. Perhaps that says something about the importance of this meal.

The earliest references to this meal, this Lord's supper, are found in Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth. You'll be surprised by the discussion and perhaps by the seriousness with which Paul takes the matters.

In the first decades of Christianity, when the followers of Jesus gathered they shared a meal. For some, it was probably the best meal they got all week. It is clear from Paul's scolding of the Corinthian Christians that they often forgot why they shared this meal that Jesus had given them. Some ate like gluttons. Some even got drunk. And, worst of all, some were excluded from the meal. I haven't seen anyone ever stagger away from our Holy Communion at St. Andrew, but I wonder how much thought we ourselves give to what is really happening when we eat the bread and drink from the cup.

A bridge

Christians are all over the place when it comes to Holy Communion. We all (or at least, most) affirm that it is breathtakingly significant, But ask "What is really happening?" and you'll get a lot of answers. Scripture doesn't help much here. What exactly did Jesus mean

when he said “This is my body . . . this is my blood” or “Do this in remembrance of me”? The disciples were perplexed and so are we.

In keeping with John Wesley, Methodists are theologians of the middle. We are a bridging church. This reflects our roots in the Church of England, which, during the Protestant reformation, sought to hold together those who wanted to stay with Rome and those who sought a return to “primitive” Christianity (the Puritans, for example). We see this Methodist (and Anglican) commitment to finding the middle way, the *via media*, in many areas of Christian doctrine and practice, including our understanding of Holy Communion. Since we are searching for the middle way, let’s look at the two extremes.

Rome and Zwingli

In the text box below, I’ve tried to summarize the Roman Catholic view of Communion; namely, that by consecrating the elements (the bread and wine), they become the body and blood of Christ. For a Catholic, when Jesus said, “This is my body,” he meant just that. But many Protestant reformers challenged that understanding. One, Huldrych Zwingli, held that the Lord’s Supper is merely a symbolic meal, a recalling or memorial of the Last Supper. Remembrance, then, becomes no more than recollection. Many Baptist and similar denominations hold this Zwinglian view.

You can see how these differing views would lead to very different practices. Daily Mass by Roman Catholics is understandable since they believe the Mass makes Christ physically present. Likewise, if Communion is no more than a symbolic recalling, then one might practice Communion infrequently.

Transubstantiation

There’s a mouthful. Many protestants think Roman Catholics believe that at Communion, the bread and wine are magically changed into the body and blood of Christ. This seems like nonsense, since the bread and wine still look and taste like bread and wine. Perhaps this will help.

This Roman Catholic doctrine is grounded in Aristotle’s understanding of reality, as worked out by Thomas Aquinas and others.

Aristotle held that every object consists of *accidents* and *substance*. The object’s *accidents* are all of its properties, everything that can be perceived by our senses. Its *substance* is its essence. For example, the *accidents* of this piece of paper you are holding are its color, size, texture, shape, smell and so on – everything that makes it paper so far as you can tell. But for Aristotle, its essence, its underlying “paper-ness” is something different; it is its *substance*. In other words, the piece of paper’s *substance* is separate from the paper’s properties.

Aquinas and others applied Aristotle’s view of reality to the bread and wine of communion. The doctrine of transubstantiation (“conversion in substance”) holds that when the bread and wine are blessed, their *accidents* remain as they were. They still look and taste like bread and wine. But . . . the *substance* of the bread and wine is converted from “bread-ness” and “wine-ness” to “Christ-ness.” They may taste like bread and wine but the underlying reality is that they have become the body and blood of Christ. Thus, Roman Catholics claim the actual physical presence of Christ at Communion.

The Real Presence of Christ

In our striving to find the middle way, United Methodists embrace that Jesus Christ is really present at Communion, in a way that he is not otherwise present, but we do not try to explain exactly how we experience Christ’s presence. We hold that “in remembrance” is far more than a symbolic recalling of Jesus’ death; it is the dynamic re-presentation of the living Christ. This is from “This Holy Mystery”¹:

¹This is all way too big a topic for this frustratingly short study. For more, you might read “This Holy Mystery: A UMC Understanding of Holy Communion,” which was adopted by the General Conference in 2004. It is available at www.gbcd.org/worship>thisholymystery.

“United Methodists, along with other Christian traditions, have tried to provide clear and faithful interpretations of Christ’s presence in the Holy Meal. Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. For United Methodists, the Lord’s Supper is anchored in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but is not primarily a remembrance or memorial. We do not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works. We understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms. In the Holy Meal of the church, the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God’s saving gift for the whole world.” [Underlining added]

Past, present, and future

When we come to the Lord’s table, we are stepping out of our own time and into God’s time. The past and the future come rushing to meet us. Think of it as living on heaven’s clock. The Jews grasped this. Each year at Passover, the father would gather the family together over the Passover meal, saying “This *is* the night when our God, the Holy One, blessed be he, came down to Egypt and rescued us from the Egyptians . . .” Of course, it wasn’t *the* night – at least not as we reckon time. But it was *the* night in God’s time. The family was one with their ancestors during that meal. They were the same family being rescued in an eternal act of salvation.

In the same way, when we come forward to partake of Holy Communion, we are with Christ, with the disciples, and with all the people of God. God’s future, his victory over sin and death, comes rushing to meet us over the Lord’s table . . . the family table.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The following discussion questions were written for the Connection Groups that are meeting during this series:

We come to the table of Christ as one, as a family, as brothers and sisters in Christ. The cup we share, the bread we break is given to each of us, to all of us – as one. This is a table of love for those who are in need – and all are in desperate need of Jesus and his sacrifice of himself.

1. The Connection Group video for this week makes the point that St. Andrew is not a “Rotary Club.” True. But what are we? What binds us together? Common values? Common goals? Common preferences? If we are truly a family, one family, what makes us one? How role does Holy Communion have in this family?
2. Share and reflect upon your own perspectives on and experiences with Holy Communion. What were you taught about Holy Communion? Where did you learn this? How has your understanding of Communion changed over time? Perhaps you were once Roman Catholic or Southern Baptist. How does this affect your understanding of Communion at St. Andrew? Do you find Communion to be a rewarding experience or just another ritual we practice? Why do you think that Communion Sunday is often a poorly-attended service at some churches?
3. How might Communion be more meaningful for you at St. Andrew? Would you like to see us take Communion more often? Less often? Which part of the way we practice Holy Communion at St. Andrew is most meaningful to you? What is least meaningful?
4. Imagine that you are going to ask a friend to come with you to St. Andrew for a service at which we will share Holy Communion. You want to invite them to not only “come and see” but to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). Further imagine that they’ve not been a churchgoer. How would you prepare them for the experience? How would you convey the meaning of Holy Communion to them?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Exodus 12 The story of the Passover meal	Tuesday, Mark 14:17-26 Mark's story of Jesus' instituting of the Lord's Supper
Wednesday, Luke 22:14-20 Luke's telling	Thursday, Matthew 26:17-30 Matthew's telling
Friday, 1 Corinthians 11:27-34 Examining ourselves before taking Communion. What point about Communion do you think Paul is trying to drive home?	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Connecting the Dots: Genesis to Revelation

An Introduction to the Bible

Beginning Monday, October 22, Scott Engle will teach a four-week-long church-wide Bible study on Monday evenings. We will meet in the renovated Wesley Hall from 7:00 to 8:30.

There will even be “can’t-miss” music to start our evening!

This will be an introduction to the Bible and the over-arching biblical story.
The series will be suitable for youth and adults.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own.

This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottngle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Genesis

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in **Piro Hall** on Tuesdays (a new room).

Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The class is often led by Dr. Scott Engle and is organized into series.

Scott is teaching the current series:

Talking about Jesus with Scoffers, Skeptics, and the Indifferent.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottngle.org.

Sermon Notes