

When do you experience the most joy? Understandably, it's a little bit of a difficult question. I imagine there are a few different areas. But when do you experience the most joy? A recent study out of the University of Minnesota sheds light on this connection between where you spend time and where you experience joy. They conducted research across multiple states, and a thousand adults in each state said eating meals together with friends and family was when they experienced the most joy. The research demonstrated the only way you can really improve on that is if you take that meal and eat it outside.

You experience the most joy when you are around a table with family and friends. It might be the reason why you're probably familiar with the picture from Norman Rockwell entitled *Freedom From Want*. In that picture, it details the idyllic Thanksgiving dinner. Many of us look at the meal, and maybe it harkens back to a particular age or a time.

But I have a gut feeling that this isn't like most of the meals that you have experienced. Some of you, when you hear the research around joy connected to eating around a table, may wonder if the researchers have sat at your table with your friends and family.

I was reminded of a meal years ago with friends and family. I was meeting people for the first time and was in their kitchen having a meal when a disagreement broke out around the table. This disagreement rapidly accelerated. It exploded in anger. Strong feelings passed from one to the other. I'm the newbie at the table and don't like conflict. So the best option for me at that moment was to just keep shoveling food in my mouth. If my mouth is full, they would not ask my opinion on this disagreement.

So about five plates of food later and multiple trips to fill my cup with water, I was stuffed and bloated beyond belief, but I successfully avoided any conflict, at least that I had to participate in. My gut tells me that this may be a bit more of your experience with meals. Some of us even come to dread holiday meals. Our tables often don't look like Rockwell's depiction.

Another famous painting by Andrei Rublev is titled *The Holy Trinity*. It's one of the most famous icons in Christian history. It's a painting in which the 15th-century Russian artist Andrei Rublev depicts the scene in Genesis 18. If you remember from the beginning of our hospitality series, we talked about that particular image in which Abraham and Sarah are there, and three visitors come to surprise Abraham. In the scene, Abraham

feeds these three men. Rublev depicts this in the painting as a Trinitarian interpretation of that scene.

It is his depiction of the very essence of the Triune God—God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. In the painting, you'll notice that the three figures are all very similar. You see that in the facial expressions, and yet each one still has distinctive characteristics. Whether it's the clothing they're wearing, the way in which they're leaning, the posture of their hands or their feet, there's a uniqueness, a sameness and yet a distinction. When you look at it, your eye bounces in a circular fashion. It's brilliant in that it depicts this triune God, this mysterious doctrine that we hold, that God is three beings, all yet one God.

It's hard for us to logically or rationally understand what we mean by the doctrine of the Trinity. It's one of the reasons that it's better understood through works of art. In the painting, they're seated around a table. I love that imagery because the image of hospitality and table welcome from so long ago in the ancient world was the space in which difference was held together. It was unified around a table. But if you look closely, you'll also notice something unique about this table. It is rectangular. There's a straight line running right across the front of it, which implies there are four sides to this table and yet three people around the table.

Rublev depicts the image of God in this way, with these three beings of all one nature yet around a rectangular table, as a way of saying there's a fourth person who is welcome at the table. You and I are that fourth. The one viewing this picture is welcome to the very table, into the inner life of God himself, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Within this unique particularity and yet unity, there's a sense in which there is no hierarchy. The Father is loving the Son, the Son is loving the Spirit, the Spirit, the Father.

There's a self-sacrificial love, and it's at that essence there rings the words of John, "God is love." The very identity of God is depicted as self-sacrificial, self-giving love. The beauty, of course, is the welcome invitation. We are welcomed into that table with God. There's something about tables. There is something about eating together. We often think of God as some transactional God, but God is kindness, goodness, love, holy, sacred, and sovereign. In the midst of all of that, it never diminishes the welcome of God, regardless of who we are.

The imagery of the table and the subsequent themes of welcome and communion are at the very core of both God's identity and who he created us to be. You and I long for communion.

Whatever your image of the table is, such as Norman Rockwell's picture, there's something in you that may say that's ridiculous and unrealistic. Yet there's something that longs for that connection. You long for that being, that communion with others, and, of course, ultimately with God.

Now, this search for communion often goes awry. We misuse food, alcohol, substances, relationships, sex, vocation, and calling. All of these illusions are our attempts to find communion, to transcend the ordinariness of our day-in and day-out lives. But don't mistake your failure to find it or the going awry of longing with the holy longing that's built up in you for communion. We spend much of our lives with vices and virtues, trying to make our way back to this table, this moment, this welcome of God. Of course, we pursue it often in all the wrong places. Yet the welcome of God remains.

At the center of Rublev's table is the communion elements. It's the element of blood, the chalice of the blood that has been given to us through the death of Jesus. See, it's Rublev's depiction that the way in which we are welcomed to the table is through the very sacrifice of God. The blood he offered for us is right there, front and center, on the table. At the very center of the life of God, is self-sacrifice and the way in which God has given his life.

I want to look at what it means to sit at that table, to be welcomed into the presence of God, because there's something about the table. There's something about this act of communion that God has instituted as the organizing practice for our lives.

Last week, we talked about how, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, there is this tremendous theme of Jesus eating and drinking with those around him, whoever he encountered. We talked about how Luke seems to depict that the mission of God is that the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

The method in which he employed is earlier in Luke 7, where it says the Son of Man came eating and drinking. The practice of table welcome was core to the life of Jesus. And therefore, as his followers, we want to make it core to our life. If we see Jesus doing this over and over and over again, we are to model our very lives after Jesus. We are learning both to be welcomed at the table and to welcome others.

Table welcome is the rhythm of extending God's hospitality by eating and drinking. Now we're taking that phrase eating and drinking, pulling it right from the text of Luke in which he says, this is what Jesus is doing. But notice that it's always beginning with the extension of God's hospitality.

For the next three weeks, counting this morning, we want to talk about the three dimensions that we welcome people around a table. This week is "Table Welcome with God." It all begins from there. Any act of hospitality is simply an extension of the hospitality that's been shown to us. Next week, we'll talk about what it means to have table welcome with those near to God or those

brothers and sisters in the faith and the way that table welcome has been central to the life of the church for many centuries.

Lastly, we'll talk about how table welcome is also for those who are far from God. Those who are outside the church, your neighbors, your friends, all of them, we are also called to extend welcome to them. So, table welcome with God, table welcome with those near to God, and table welcome with those far from God. Let's look at where this table welcome all began for the Christian story.

**Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover." "Where do you want us to prepare for it?" they asked. He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, 'The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there." They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover. Luke 22:7-13**

At the time of Passover, in Jerusalem, in the last hours before Jesus was arrested and crucified, Jerusalem would have been buzzing with people coming to experience Passover. So, finding a room would probably have been difficult, particularly furnished, because there would have been rooms all over the city filled with people doing exactly what Jesus was doing. What we'll find is that Jesus takes this ordinary meal of Passover and transforms it into the practice that you and I now call communion, the Eucharist, or the Lord's supper.

He takes that meal, which would have been practiced, and tweaks it in profound ways to breathe new life into the meal. *"When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table and he said to them, I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (v. 14).* I want to pause there because I love two things in this.

First, when it talks about when the hour came. We have a different relationship with time than the ancient world. We view it basically as linear. There's a start, and it continues forever. But the ancient imagination had much more of a cyclical understanding of time. It was a different nuance in which they would take things like this meal and breathe new life into it in a way that messed with time. So, for this particular meal, you'll see Jesus talking about the Passover.

Now, we've been in the Book of Exodus, and I promise we're coming back to it in just a few weeks. In Exodus, you remember the Passover meal. It's a feast that points all the way back to when the Israelites were liberated from slavery in Egypt. The first thing we recognize about when the hour came is that time is

also looking backward. Yet Jesus is going to do something in the present with this meal, and he's calling us to remember Exodus and bring it into the present. It will also point to the future. Past, present, and future are mashed together in this one meal in which we remember, experience, and anticipate—three dimensions of time, all mashed.

*"And he said to them, 'I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God'" (vv. 15-16).* I love Jesus' first words. So often, we have this distorted image of God that he "puts up" with us; he tolerates us. But what a beautiful image in which he sits there hours before he knows he's going to be arrested and crucified and says, "I've eagerly desired to eat this meal with you."

Do you have that image of God? Do you have that picture that he eagerly desires to welcome you around these communion tables? What a beautiful image to consider. Many of the prophets and the writers throughout the New Testament and the Old Testament anticipated the reconciliation of all things. At the very end of time, they depict it as the messianic banquet, this vision of what is to come.

The image that comes to mind for all these writers is a feast, a table in which you are welcomed. People from every tribe, nation, and tongue are brought together in unity around the table. And Jesus says, I won't eat this meal until it's fulfilled in the kingdom of God. It will find its fullest expression at the end of time. And he says, at this moment, we're getting a foretaste of what will come into the future.

**After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." vv. 17-19**

**In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But woe to that man who betrays him!" They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this. vv. 20-23**

Jesus now takes this meal, and it would have had an ordinary liturgy in which they walk from cup to cup to bread to bread. It had all these depictions and symbolisms of the Passover meal. But when Jesus takes the bread and breaks it, the expectation would not have been for Jesus to say this is my body broken for you. It was a radically new alteration. I just mentioned that all these rooms across the city would have been filled also going through this meal. Yet Jesus takes this one with his disciples and tweaks it

by saying that all of that has been pointing to him, Jesus. There's something that Jesus is doing differently in this meal.

And then we get to that famous line, that one that I'm sure you're familiar with. When he says, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Now, as I mentioned, we think of time a little bit differently than our ancient brothers and sisters. And so when we hear remembrance, we think of memory, recall, think back.

You remember the movie *Inside Out* when they had to recall a memory, like the jingle for the bubblegum commercial, and they go and get the memory. They take the ball, they plop it in the screen, and it's like boom, there's the memory, something they go and retrieve, bring in the moment, and then discard again.

I don't think that's what Jesus intends here when he says remembrance. Let me give you a not the best example, but maybe it'll help. For about the past year, I've been trying to teach my youngest daughter, Adley, how to ride a bike. We're not all that consistent. We try it once every few months, just enough time for her to forget everything I talked about and just enough time for me to forget how to actually help her and it not just end in a fight. I imagine you've had those moments if you've taught someone to ride a bike.

We get her all decked out. I stand behind her, put my hand on the seat, and run. I remember how out of shape I am, and we run and my back hurts. There's that moment where I say, "Hey, remember you got to pedal faster because the faster you pedal, the more stable you are." So we run and then I let go. Inevitably, she goes like two paces and then just falls, and there are tears. Then I got to swoop in and hold her and somehow coerce her into doing it again.

We pop her back up and we sit and talk, and I look at her and say, "Hadley, you have to remember the faster you pedal, the more stable you are." She says, "Okay, yeah, you're right. Dad. The faster I pedal, the more stable Dad, I got it." So I plop her back up. Wipe the tears. My back's hurting still, and we're running, and we're going. Then, once I let go, what do I say? When I yell, "Remember!" I want her to recall the conversation we had. But I want her to do much more than that. I want her to think about what I told her, "Pedal faster so that you're more stable." But then I want her to embody that memory. I want her to live that memory out. I want it to manifest itself in her pedaling.

It's an actualization of something that has happened in the past. Bring that thing I talked about, let it come up into the present time, change the way you're living, and actually project into the future the vision of her riding up and down the streets in front of our house, riding the bike. That moment when I say, "Remember," I'm trying to do all three of those things: past, present, and future.

Jesus gathered with his disciples in the upper room, sitting with them, takes bread and breaks it. "This is my body, broken for you." Takes the blood, the poured-out blood says, "This is my blood poured out for you. Do all of this in remembrance of me." Bring it to mind. Remember the past story of liberation, in which he brought the people out of slavery. Remember the way that God saved you and me and forgave us of our sins. We broke free from those traps. Remember that, bring it into the present, and allow it to shape how you live here and now.

Then he says that there's a feast coming that this is only preparing you for, a larger example in which you are reconciled to God, to others, to creation itself, in which all of that brokenness is expunged from the world. Do this in remembrance of me. Actualize the memory. This is the invitation before us. This is the invitation that Rublev was trying to depict with that painting: an open spot at the table. Join in the very life of God and experience that in such a way that gives shape to your life, both now and into the future.

So why does Jesus demonstrate this through the act of the meal? I want to look at four different verbs that are used in every gospel story depicting the Last Supper, in Paul's Corinthian use of this story, and also in the feeding of the 5000. Because it's the biblical writer's way of saying that this is what this meal is about. They use the exact same words in each one, four different verbs that help us to understand the distinction of why this meal is unique among other meals. Yet there's some familiarity.

So to begin, before we get to the four words, it's important to think through the word communion. It's a word that we're familiar with. It's a biblical word from 1 Corinthians 10.

**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? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17**

Now, the word "participation" is the Greek word *koinonia* or communion in English. It can be translated as participation. It can be translated as fellowship with, or it can be translated as communion. The idea of *koinonia*, particularly when it's spoken about the blood, bread, and wine that we celebrate in this meal, is this is participatory in nature. This is important because we tend to take these elements in a passive way. But the New Testament writers speak of them with the connection that we are linking into the very life of Jesus. It is a participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Another way to think of it is Colossians, in which Paul talks about the hope of glory within us. Think of Paul in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." When we partake in a meal with God, we are welcomed into the very life of God, the fellowship with the participation.

So, in this way, the meal is about the Lord's presence first and foremost. We come to the table to encounter the presence of God in a unique way.

Listen to the way this author, David Fitch, talks about it in his tiny book *Seven Practices for the Church on Mission*.

**The Lord's Table is about presence. Surely, it is about eating, but ultimately, it's a practice that shapes a group of people to be present in God's presence in Christ around the table where we eat. Then, in the process, we are able to connect with other people around the table. Our lives are then reordered socially by his presence. Fitch**

And he'd go on in this book to talk through that social ordering as part of the history of the church in which you partook in this meal, this feast, the celebration. But then you always have the door open for others to join, believer or not, welcomed around the table in which, because of their participation in the meal, and are, as believers, present to Christ, they are experiencing the presence of God almost mediated through our own connection with one another. The Lord's table, this communion, is about the presence of God, participating in the very life, death, and resurrection with God.

Back to those four verbs I mentioned. Historically, the four movements of communion are all organized around these four verbs, and they come from Luke 22:19. It says, "And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me'" (v. 19). The four verbs are take, bless, break, and give. Those four verbs create the rhythm in which the meal oscillates between. So, let's look at each of the four individually, trying to understand what Jesus is inviting us into at this meal.

## **Take**

First is the word take, "And he took the bread." The beautiful thing about this first movement is that Jesus is taking what we bring to him. The implication of God taking something means we have offered something to him. Something as meager as the material reality of bread and juice. Don't lose that. We can over-spiritualize this, and there are spiritual dimensions to it, but don't forget that in the ancient world, the divide between the material world and the spiritual world was pretty foreign. Those were interspersed together. They were porous, they overlapped and intertwined.

It's only a modern invention that we've separated the spiritual from the material. Rather, both are connected. So when it says he took the bread, you can imagine someone prepped that bread. They took the ingredients, created it, folded it in the water, yeast, and flour, and created something that you bring. Something as meager as bread. You do the same with the juice.

Now, there's a deeper meaning, of course, where we bring, over time, ourselves to the table as well. So it isn't just the physical things we offer. It's the wholeness of who we are. The beautiful thing about Jesus taking this small thing is that we bring everything we have to the table. As Brandon mentioned in our worship set, we don't have to fix things up and make them perfect. Rather, the beautiful thing about Jesus is that he is in the habit of taking that which is meager and making it something far more divine and extraordinary.

It's a consistent rhythm, whether it's working with people or working with a young boy who had five loaves and a few fish and saying, "I can use this meager gift, and I can feed thousands." We show up to the table and bring ourselves. All that is right in us and all that is wrong in us, and we bring it not through our own sanctifying work but by only the work of Jesus. We take it to Jesus, and we offer whatever it is we have, whatever we can muster, and we lay it at the feet of Jesus. He takes it and does something with it.

Eugene Peterson, in his book *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* says.

**It's in that act that salvation is set in an ambiance of sheer acceptance. God receives us and what we bring to him just as we are. God does not extort us. God does not exploit us. God does not force us. He takes only what we offer. Coercion is no attribute of God. Peterson**

Jesus said, "I eagerly desire to eat this Passover." Knowing that whatever the disciples were to bring would be a meager gift. So to you and I, come as we are before the Lord, and he takes that. Over the years, as parents, we often internalize a message or internalize one into our children, stating that we have to perform or behave in a certain way to achieve or to receive acceptance.

With young children, there's a level of that which is actually important. Moral habits, understandings, and virtues need to be instilled and internalized in our children. But what often happens is in that act of trying to instruct our children, we take on a message that says, "If I don't achieve, I am not loved." The problem for most of us is we don't outgrow that message, and we bring that message into our relationship with God. We see all of these instructions in the scriptures that are inviting us to live more human and to free us, and we assume that we have to fix ourselves up in order to experience the love of God.

May we never forget the story of Exodus. God liberated the people out of Egypt and the only thing they brought was their cries, "God, I need help." It wasn't until after God had done the saving work and ushered them out of slavery that he gave them commandments. The commandments are not the way you earn the love of God, but rather, you are loved as a child of God. Then Jesus says, "Now, let me teach you the way to flourish and find freedom." We bring ourselves with a broken and contrite heart,

as the psalmist would say. Jesus takes that and says, "That's enough. I can work with that."

## **Bless**

The second verb is bless. The text says that he gave thanks. The word gave thanks here is actually the word Eucharist. It's where we get that term for the Eucharist. And it's this word, that actually gained so much momentum in the early church that our Catholic brothers and sisters still use. It's the blessing, the Thanksgiving meal. It is a core central understanding of what it means to partake in this meal.

Now, it's interesting to note that none of the authors of the gospels actually depict the words Jesus said when it says he blessed them, and that's intentional. Because one, the authors are pretty intentional with everything they do. But it's intentional in the sense that it's meant to foster in us an understanding of a broad thanksgiving. What I mean by that is the Christian worldview, what the scriptures teach us; what Jesus teaches us is that nothing is earned and nothing is deserved.

All of life is actually grace. Every aspect of life bestowed on us is not because of what we have done but flows out of loving communion at the core of who God is. God just gives and gives and gives. At the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus is to be one who recognizes this blessing, that all of life is grace. It's a central practice for us who follow Jesus to cultivate a spirit and a posture of gratitude.

One of the things I do each and every morning when I start my time with the Lord, sitting in my chair, is try to think of three things for which I'm grateful. It could be as simple as the coffee that's warming up across the room or my chair as I get to watch the sunset or the sunrise every morning, and I get to say, "God, thank you for another morning." His mercies are new every day. What a gift my wife and my girls are. What a gift Jesus is. The church I get to pastor, the staff I get to work with, the fact that there's food on the table, and even more than that, I have a choice in what I eat.

All of life is grace. As followers of Jesus, we must come to this place to recognize the gift that life is. Jesus took the bread, and he broke it. He took it, he blessed it, and he poured his life into it. And so it's in that same posture that we offer gratitude to God for all his grace.

## **Break**

The third verb is what I alluded to. It's break. He took bread, and he broke it. Now, this, too, has a double meaning. It has a meaning in the sense that we come and everything we break, we bring to God. We offer ourselves as a broken and contrite heart. We give it to Jesus. He takes that but notice that he doesn't leave it as it is, but he breaks it. He takes it, and he breaks it apart. He's transforming it. Jesus is in the business of doing something new. So when we bring ourselves as meager and broken, Jesus says, "I

will take that and break it into different pieces and make something new." Jesus takes that bread and breaks it.

This particular breaking of the bread actually became quite a popular way to talk about this meal. You'll hear echoes if you're familiar with the biblical story of Acts 2:42, being the disciples. They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching to the fellowship and to the breaking of bread. For the disciples, this became a practice that they wouldn't just experience once a month with a small cracker and a small juice, but rather continually they would eat together and call it the breaking of bread. It was a regular act of bringing their meager selves before the Lord and saying, "God, would you break me and make me into something new?"

Most profoundly, I said it had a double meaning: imagine the scene. You're Jesus at this meal, knowing hours later, you'll be arrested and taken to the cross. What the disciples didn't know at that point is when he said that this is my body broken for you. They didn't have a category for what he meant by that. But in a few short hours, they witness it from afar. They didn't hang with him, but they would witness what he meant by that as Jesus marched to the cross. In the same way that he took the bread and ripped it apart, the very body of Jesus on the cross would be ripped apart for others. It says he took the bread, blessed it, and then he broke it. He said, "This is my body broken for you."

This idea of it being broken for you is the reality that through death comes life. This is a principle of all the world. If you had breakfast this morning, you enacted this very breaking of bread without knowing it because in your breakfast, whatever it was, something, a plant, an animal, whatever it is, had to die in order to bestow life into you.

I don't know of a more visceral example that God could have created other than the very fabric of the world runs on this idea that all life comes through death. Your lunch, your dinner, your snack, and your breakfast, every time you consume food, you are actually, without knowing it, enacting the very grace of God that from death comes life. So Jesus says, "This is my body broken for you."

It's hard for us in the modern world because we've bought the myth of individualism, we've bought the myth of self-sufficiency, but what we find at this table when the bread is broken and distributed to us is that we are far less self-sufficient than we anticipate because every person in here, the reason you're breathing, is because your life was dependent on something or someone. Something or someone had to give their life to you so that you can experience life. That's just the way the world works.

Jesus, as the penultimate example of that, says, "I will break my body to bring about the forgiveness of sins." The ultimate sacrifice for you to lay down is that you are interdependent on the very life of God. Jesus, in the flesh, takes the bread, blesses it, and breaks it.

### **Given**

Then lastly, the fourth verb is given, gave it to them. Now, in the same way, the first take assumes that we brought an offering, here's the reverse. Now, Jesus has transformed the meal, and he gives something, which means the invitation is for us to take it back. He has taken all of that meager gift. He's blessed it. He's breathed life into it. And now he extends it out to you. The invitation is, "Will you take the cup? Will you take the bread? Will you partake and participate in this communion meal?" The invitation is to receive. That has always been the invitation. It's always before us, invited us into the very life of God.

In the communion meal, we receive what we could never have given. That's the transformed divine blessing in which God has given us his very life for our own sake, and he invites us in to take it. Jesus takes, blesses, breaks, and gives.

Then he says, "Do all this, the giving, taking, blessing, breaking, and the giving, in remembrance of me." Because it's somehow in some way in that act where we are welcomed around the table, a meal with the very Creator of the universe in whom we bring our sinful, broken selves before that we confess, repent, welcome, and enjoy the presence of God.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

© 2024 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA  
Catalog No.1488-2FC