

"When Jesus holds up the cup and offers what is in it as the fluid of forgiveness, he is not talking to people with a short list of minor sins. He is talking to people who will turn him in, who will scatter to the fourwinds at the first sign of trouble, and who will swear they never knew him. He is talking to people who should have been his best friends on earth who turn out not to have a loyal bone in their bodies, and he is forgiving them ahead of time, as surely as if he had said, 'I know who you are. I know you will not be innocent of the blood of this cup, but I will not let that come between us. . . . Let my life become your life, through the blood of this covenant.'"—Barbara Brown Taylor

HOLY COMMUNION

DESIRE	to be nourished by Christ, tasting the sweet depths of redemption
DEFINITION	The Lord's Supper celebrates God's redemptive plan through the sacrificial death of Jesus. Through this meal of bread and wine (or grape juice) we join ourselves to Christ and feed on him in our hearts through faith.
SCRIPTURE	<p>"While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take it; this is my body.'</p> <p>Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it.</p> <p>'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,' he said to them." (Mark 14:22-24)</p> <p>"For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Corinthians 11:26)</p> <p>"Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people." (Acts 2:46-47)</p> <p>"Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." (1 Corinthians 10:17)</p>
PRACTICE INCLUDES	partaking of Christ's body and blood in the sacrament of communion
GOD-GIVEN FRUIT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • keeping company with Jesus no matter what happens • having nourishment for the journey • developing a deeper love for Jesus • a growing awareness of your own spiritual poverty • more fully appreciating Jesus'; sacrificial love to rescue you • appreciating the diversity of other believers who take of the Lord's Supper with you • having a passion for unity of the church worldwide

HOLY COMMUNION



ONE OF THE VERY FIRST PRACTICES IN THE EARLY CHURCH was the observance of Communion, also known as the Lord's Supper or celebration of the Eucharist. Jesus himself instituted this practice with his disciples just hours before his death. This Supper ties the blood of the Old Testament sacrifices to God's radical rescue of humankind through his Son. Kathleen Norris writes in *Amazing Grace*, "The incarnation (and I might add communion) remains a scandal to anyone who wants religion to be a purely spiritual matter, an anesthetized, bloodless bliss." It reminds us that our faith is not ethereal and bodiless. The radical nature of our sin problem resolves itself in innocent blood. In Exodus 24:7-8 we read: "[Moses] took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. . . . Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, 'This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.'" Building on the old covenant, Jesus ushers in the new covenant.

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Jesus becomes the innocent lamb that takes away the sin of the world. Sacrificing his own life, he opens a doorway from death to life, from rebellion to friendship, from separation to communion and from senseless suffering to redemptive suffering.

The significance of the Lord's Supper is revealed in its sacramental nature. A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible reality. Holy Communion invites us into deeper unity and communion with Jesus and his body. The bread broken and the wine poured out signify the cost of the Communion meal. Christ's blood and body were sacrificed for us! And his sacrifice becomes a pattern for our own journey. The "feast" of Christ's table nourishes us and strengthens us with heavenly food. This new manna is the way we get from here to home. In receiving this nourishment we anticipate another feast—the mar-

riage supper of the Lamb—the table of eternal union and communion.

In many ways the Lord's Supper opens us wide to a divine mystery. This mystery is sometimes dubbed the "paschal mystery" of redemption: Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again. Explaining this mystery may be beyond us, but that does not mean we cannot participate in it. In Communion, Christ is here for us. We eat of his body and are part of his body—the one loaf. Though we may feel alone in our journey, we are part of the train of apostles, prophets, martyrs, saints and all servants of God. The meal reminds us that we belong and are not alone. Because of Jesus, all will be well.

Years ago Tim Keller used this illustration from *The Lord of the Rings* to convey the immense meaning of the Lord's table. Enemies and dread weapons pummel the walls of the city of Gondor. As the city gates begin to give way, death, doom and the bitterness of defeat take hold. The evil dark lord grimly claims the city for himself. But in that moment of bleak despair the Riders of Rohan come charging, their horns blowing. J. R. R. Tolkien writes in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, "Pippin rose to his feet, . . . and he stood listening to the horns, and it seemed to him that they would break his heart with joy. And never in after years could he hear a horn blown in the distance without tears starting in his eyes."

The Lord's Supper reminds us that when the dark lord looms before us shrieking "all is lost," the Lord of light stepped forth and said, "This is my body broken for you." When we partake, we taste what redemption cost God in order to call us home. Indeed it is hard to see the bread and the wine without "tears starting in [our] eyes."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is participating in the Lord's Supper like for you?
2. What do you hope to receive at the Lord's table?
3. Have you ever participated in Communion at a church that celebrated it differently than was your custom? What was that like for you?

SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

1. Prepare yourself for Communion ahead of time. Read John 13:1-17. Imagine you are there at the table with Jesus. What are your feelings and thoughts? How does it feel to have Jesus wash your feet? How does it feel to drink the cup knowing your own betrayals? Confess your sins and then attend Communion with what is in your heart to say to God.
2. If you are in a tradition that bakes the bread for Communion and dresses the table for this meal, offer to make the bread or set the table. As you do this, contemplate the import of what this all means.
3. If you are in a tradition that "adores the host," spend time in the Lord's presence thanking him for his body given for us.

Resources on Holy Communion

That We May Perfectly Love Thee by Robert Benson

From *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, by Adele Ahlberg Calhoun.
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