

# The Joyful Feast

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In a few short weeks, we will begin the practice of sharing testimony here at St. Peter's church. A small group of congregation members have been asked to prepare short statements about their journey of faith. Today, I share a sermon that is perhaps less sermon and more testimony, as we celebrate world communion Sunday. I hope you consider your story as you hear a bit of mine today.

This is the joyful feast of the people of God. Men and women, youth and children, come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and gather about Christ's table.

The music hums in my head. Memories flood in. Once a month the tune would play from the old organ at St. Paul Church. I would sing along with my parents, and the entire congregation as we prepared for communion together. Some of my earliest memories are from that place, the sunlight shining in from the side windows, my brother and I being the exact height that if we rested the hymnals on the pews in front of us, we could read along without having to hold all that weight.. Singing with joy, singing with anticipation for the day I could join in the feast.

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More often than not, my family would follow worship with a visit into the city to see my grandparents. Joined by aunts, uncles, and cousins, we would gather about the family table, sharing course after course of food. Pasta and sauce, Chicken and potatoes in the winter, sausage and peppers in the summer, we would run in after playing outside, men and women, youth and children, Italian and American, our dual citizenships and dual languages swirling and mixing as bowls were passed and the meal was shared.

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When I was in seminary, one of the first traditions I established among my friends was Sunday supper. On the first Sunday of the month, we would drag this large, heavy, wooden table from the study room in the basement, up two short flights of stairs to my apartment. We covered the table with various cloths and fabrics until the day I received a Christmas gift from the church I was serving at the time. The money came with strict instructions to not buy books, but to indulge in something that would bring me joy. I bought a tablecloth that fit the twelve-person table, and we shook it out and

smoothed it down month after month as we gathered and shared stories and celebrations, argued scripture and asked advice.

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When asked, in a recent survey, why do you take communion? Blogger Danielle Shroyer responds:

I take communion because I am hungry for a place of radical acceptance, where the tragedies and hopes of life are confronted. I am hungry for food that reminds me God's love is so abundant it feeds the whole world. I take communion because I have been hungry for the wrong things. I have wanted to name God all by myself, to exclude others, to feast on my own apathy and be left to my own devices. At the table, I am reminded of my hunger -- and of the Only One whose bread does not leave me empty.

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In my home church, communion was observed not as a remembrance of Jesus' last supper, but of the meal shared with disciples that showed them Life is stronger than death, love is greater than fear. The liturgy reads:

*Beloved in Christ, the Gospel tells us that on the first day of the week  
Jesus Christ was raised from death, appeared to Mary Magdalene,  
on that same day sat at the table with two disciples,  
and was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

*In company with all believers in every time and beyond time,  
we come to this table to know the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread.*

Invoking the great cloud of witnesses, this tradition reminds us that what happens at this table goes beyond these four walls. What happens at this table is bigger than you and me and all that we can see with only our eyes.

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Rita Nakashima Brock is speaking to a group of pastors working for continuing education credits. She shows slide after slide, depicting first-century art, mosaics decorating ancient churches long-abandoned many years ago. Silver patens and dented chalices flash on the screen "See?" She is almost shouting. "On this plate? What's being depicted?" "communion," we dutifully reply. And who is serving it? Who is passing out the bread? It's not a priest...It's Jesus himself. Jesus is the one who presides at the table!" I elbow the friend next to me. "Is this supposed to be surprising?" I stage whisper, and am answered with an exaggerated shrug. The world-famous theologian continues, Communion in the first century was not a funeral for Jesus. It was a recreation of paradise, where all people gather at the table together.

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Disciples of Jesus, sharing a meal before his arrest and betrayal. 1<sup>st</sup> century believers, sharing a vision of the risen Christ over the broken bread. Centuries of theology and mythology, history and tradition surround the meal we share today. Our culture and backgrounds are brought to the table, speaking to what we eat and say as we attempt to draw close to the one who calls us forward. Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected.

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St. Peter's Church. World Communion Sunday 2011. The servers are dressed in green, the plates piled high on the altar. We are poised and ready.

And I wonder, Why do you take communion? What is it that draws you to this table? Is it to remember Christ's death? Or to celebrate his life? To look inward at yourself, or look outward at the world Christ so loved? Are we each alone with God, or are we all joined by the great cloud of witnesses, part of the company of believers in every time and beyond time?

Are the answers to these questions even black and white, or shades of grey, or a wonderful rainbow of beliefs patch-worked together in a shining mosaic as we each bring ourselves to the table?

Today we will join with brothers and sisters around the world in this sacrament and celebration. We each bring our histories and our stories with us. We each carry our memories, our hopes and dreams to the altar with us. Whatever our understanding of this holy meal might be, I pray that we each come in our own way, to know the risen Christ in the breaking of the bread.

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Let us prepare with a song.

Amen.