

Breaking Bread Together at the Welcoming Table

While we were at general assembly in June, I attended a Communion Service offered by the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship.

This was a beautiful ritual that has been largely lost by most UU churches. Admittedly, it does come with some difficult words and difficult images – confessing our sins and then consuming the body and blood of Christ. But we could think of this in different terms, within a historical and cultural perspective.

Wendy Bell, minister of The First Congregational Unitarian Church in Harvard, MA, says in her article [Food as Sacrament](#), “Communion . . . is really just a term for a ritual meal in which participants eat sacred foods. . . . the ritual sharing of foods has been important in all cultures, western and eastern. In the western traditions, out of which our tradition grew, ritual meals have included the Jewish Seder, Muslim feasting each night of Ramadan after the sun goes down, and the ancient Love Feasts of the early Christian church, which brought together all Christians – rich and poor, free and slave, male and female – in a meal symbolic of oneness and fellowship.”

Bread and wine have always been central to rituals that honor and build community. As Jewish men and women, Jesus and his followers would have blessed and shared the bread and wine at their Passover meal. Years ago, I regularly attended Synagogue for a couple of years. Every Saturday morning, after the Shabbat service, the rabbi blessed the bread

and wine, and everyone got a piece of bread or some other baked good, and a tiny cup of wine. It was a ritual of honoring the divine for giving the bread and wine, but also for honoring the community that shared it. Years later, while attending a pagan ritual that celebrated the harvest, we also blessed and shared bread and wine.

And so when Jesus and His followers shared the bread and wine at the meal we know as the “last supper” they were practicing a ritual that was already ancient. But because Jesus knew He had enemies and would soon be dead in this life, He asked His followers to remember Him when they ate bread and drank wine. Take this bread, it is My Body. Take this wine, it is My Blood. With this symbol of His body and His blood, they were asked to carry on as a community, continuing His work. With this symbol of His body and His blood, He intended that His liberating teachings of love, compassion and forgiveness live on. He could have said, and we can think of it as “Take this bread; it is the Strength of Community. Take this wine; it is the Joy of Community.”

Rev. Earl K. Holt III, minister of the First Unitarian Church of St. Louis, MO, says in his sermon [A Common Miracle](#) – “I feel it is a great and very sad irony that Communion should have become almost exactly the opposite of what the word means – common participation, common union – to become instead a source of division and divisiveness, within the church as well as outside it. This table is and ought to be a common table, set for all, open to all, accessible to all, welcoming all.”

Rev. Holt continues to explain “. . . I suspect that Communion itself presents difficulties, for its strong associations are not only Christian but magical. Protestants of course do not believe in trans-substantiation (where the wine is magically transformed into blood) but the rationalistic/literalistic tendencies of our theological thought in this century have caused us to regard all rituals with suspicion, and particularly those like Communion which unquestionably carry overtones of miracle and undertones of magic. . . . We hunger and so we eat. We thirst and so we drink. Give us this day our daily bread. Daily bread is itself a miracle, as too many of our brothers and sisters throughout the earth know all too well. Gandhi said: There are so many hungry people in the world that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”

We hunger and so we eat. We thirst and so we drink. But our hunger and our thirst are deeper than physical needs. We hunger for the comfort and strength of community. We thirst for the love and joy of community. We hunger and thirst to belong to something greater than ourselves. Take this bread; it is the strength of community, the comfort of community. Take this wine; it is the joy of community, the love of community.

Again quoting from Wendy Bell’s article: “Unitarian Universalists participate in communion services all the time without ever talking about the body and the blood, but for the most part . . . these communions are ‘non-traditional’ – water communions, flower communions. . . . When we do use traditional elements – some kind of bread and some kind of juice or cider – we usually are recognizing and giving thanks for our connectedness, which is, I do believe, essential to communion of any form.”

“Still, I think there can be ways to talk about the body and blood that are meaningful and powerful for us. Not the body and blood of Christ – not the body and blood of a god or a man. Rather, the way that I’ve talked about it with my congregation – that we are all of one body and that we are all of one blood – in other words, we are all part of the same human family – and even more, part of the same family of the natural world. In other words, that we are connected not only to one another, but also to all life.”

“It seems to me that this physical connectedness is a fundamental truth that we all too often forget at our peril and at the peril of other life on this planet. Our forgetfulness affects the choices that we make every day of our lives. And one of the tasks of religion – that which binds us together – is to help us remember, in this very embodied way, that we are bound together, that we are of one body and one blood.”

So now we have examined some different takes on the symbolism of the bread and wine, with help from Wendy Bell and Rev. Holt. But what about that bit about confessing our sins? It is typical in Protestant communion traditions to include a group confession prior to the sharing of bread and wine. Confession is good for the soul, they say, but as Unitarian Universalists we may not usually think of ourselves as “sinners.”

It is not useful or productive to live a life just patting yourself on the back for a job well done. Neither is it helpful to beat yourself up over every mistake you have made. However, if we can make a ritual of privately acknowledging things we wished we had done better, for whatever reason,

forgiving ourselves, and at the same time forgiving others in the congregation for any offense we have taken, we have a powerful tool for personal and community growth.

So what does this look like? The words can be quite simple and yet quite meaningful. An example is printed in our order of service; you are invited to read along with me at this time:

Confession (unison)

Whatever disaffection there is between me and those who are or have been close to me – I would seek the root or cause of such disaffection and the illumination to understand it. *(pause)*

Where I have wronged or given offense deliberately or without intention, I seek a face-to-face forgiveness. *(pause)*

What I can undo I am willing to try; what I cannot undo, with that I seek to make my peace. *(pause)*

Where I have taken offense or feel I have been wronged, I am willing to try to find forgiveness in my heart, and seek to make my peace.
(pause)

Amen and Blessed Be.

Making such a confession and plea for forgiveness to ourselves and to each other is a powerful statement on our commitment to community and

personal growth. Making this confession, this commitment, prepares us to share the bread and wine of community, the strength and joy of community.

Let us now celebrate the strength and joy of our community with bread and wine, or in this case, grape juice. In a moment, we will ask those who wish to participate to come up the center aisle. You will be handed a bit of bread (gluten free if needed), and then be invited to dip your bread into the chalice of grape juice. As you move through the procession, we will be singing #100 – “I’ve Got Peace Like a River.” Those who choose to remain at their seats will also sing. *<The words will be on the board up front, so you do not need to carry your hymnal when you come forward for communion.>* If anyone would like to participate, but is unable to come forward, please remain at your seat, and we will come to you at the end, if you raise your hand.

(At this point the three celebrants are needed in front of the altar – one in the center holds the platter of bread, one some distance to either side of her/him each hold a goblet of grape juice.)

Blessing the Bread and Wine

May this bread be a source of strength for us and for our community. May this juice be a source of joy for us and for our community. May we find strength and joy in this community as we consume these blessed foods.

Amen and Blessed Be.

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, all are welcome at this table, no matter what your belief. We are community and we break bread together.

Now please come forward, down the center aisle, to receive the bread and juice. Once you have your piece of bread, move to the right or the left and you will receive your juice by intinction, which is, dipping a corner of the bread into the juice. Then you are free to consume it and return to your seats.

(As bread is given, the celebrant says “The strength of community.” As the bread is dipped in the juice, the celebrant says “The joy of community.”)

IMPORTANT: Ask if anyone was unable to come forward and would like to receive communion at this time.

I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river in my soul. I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river in my soul.

I've got joy like a fountain

I've got love like an ocean

I've got pain like an arrow

I've got tears like the raindrops

I've got strength like a mountain