Sermon, March 27, 2022

1 Corinthians 11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we move from the sacrament of Holy Baptism to Holy Communion. Baptism joins us to the body of Christ as children of God. Communion nourishes us in our journey as children of God.

When I teach First Communion classes, I always ask the kids what their favorite meal is. How about some of your favorite meals?

The kids usually go for pizza or spaghetti or cheeseburgers or chicken nuggets. Once in awhile one will surprise me and say something like shrimp. My favorite meal has to be roast beef. With mashed potatoes and peas. And if it’s really special, there would be biscuits.

It’s not every day that they get pizza or shrimp, just like we don’t get our favorite foods every day. However, there are foods that may appear on our tables most if not every day. When I was growing up, there was always bread on the table. Maybe some of your families were like that, or still would like some bread with your meal. It’s why restaurants almost always have some type of rolls or bread come out before or during the meal.

Bread has been a staple food for probably as long as people were able to cook it over a fire. The first recording of the word bread is in Genesis 3: 19. God tells the banished Adam and Eve that they will have to work to have bread.

In biblical times, bread would have been on every table at every meal. Sometimes it was the only food of the meal. Bread was used as a spoon to convey foods to one’s mouth. It sopped up the gravy left in the bowl, something you might do today with your bread.

When the Israelites prepare to leave Egypt, they are in a hurry. The bread they make for their journey is unleavened. There is no time to let it rise. After the angel of death passes over their houses and Pharaoh releases them from slavery, the Israelites get the heck out of Dodge as soon as they can.

Exodus 12 gives us God’s instructions on how to commemorate this day of liberation for the Israelites. It is called the Festival of Unleavened Bread. We know it better as “Passover” for the angel of death passed over them.

This is the meal that Joshua and the Israelites celebrate when they camp in Gilgal in Canaan. With the meal, they give thanks for God’s leading them through the wilderness to the promised land. They are now settled in a place that provides food for them. God no longer has to provide manna for they are able to provide for themselves.

Over time, this festival became more ritualized. The Israelites in Egypt were to kill a lamb, put its blood on the doorframe and lintel of their houses, and then eat the lamb. In the Passover meal that developed, they no longer put the blood on their doorframes, but they continued to eat lamb.

Other foods were added to the ritual meal. Many Jewish people celebrate Passover with this meal today. Called a Seder Meal, it consists of unleavened bread, lamb, a hard boiled egg, salt water, parsley, horseradish and my favorite, harroset.

The unleavened bread or matza of course represents the Israelites hurried flight from Egypt. The hard boiled or roasted egg symbolizes life. Parsley, representing hope and redemption, is served with a bowl of salt water. That is for the tears shed by the Israelites.

A bitter herb, usually horseradish, reminds celebrants of the bitterness of slavery. Often the horseradish is spread on a piece of matza to be eaten.

The lamb for the Seder is only the shank bone. Because these may be difficult to find, a chicken bone will suffice. It symbolizes sacrificial offering and the outstretched arm of God.

Harroset is perhaps best described as apple pie filling. It is a mixture of chopped apples, nuts, cinnamon and wine. It is a reminder of the mortar used by the Jewish slaves in the construction of buildings in Egypt.

Wine is important in this ritual meal. There are four glasses or cups consumed as the appropriate prayers are said. Therefore, Passover is a rather festive meal!

Jesus was celebrating the Passover with his disciples shortly before his crucifixion. We’ll talk more about that particular meal next Sunday. For now, we know that this tradition of Passover continued each year as a major festival for the Jewish people.

The eating of bread together is seen as a large part of the fellowship of the early church. After the people had attended temple worship and teaching, they would go home and enjoy a meal together. During this meal, they would remember the words of Jesus…do this in remembrance of me. Acts chapter 2 tells us that they ate their food with glad and generous hearts. It sounds like a good time and all was right in the world.

Or was it? In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul tells the people of the church in Corinth that all is not so perfect. In fact, he’s heard that things are bad and getting worse when it comes to the breaking of bread part of their worship.

First he has heard there are divisions within the church. He doesn’t spell out exactly what those divisions are, but he is not happy about them. Perhaps it was a split between men and women who are now finding their place on equal footing with the men. It could be between the wealthy and the poor.

This division has caused a problem with their observance of the Lord’s supper as well. As the church met in people’s homes, there was not a large number of participants in these worship times. As they were leaving the temple, it might have been a bit like when we leave our worship service. Not everyone leaves at the same time. Some of us linger a bit to chat, to lock up the building and to count the offering.

Imagine if we were all going to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ home for lunch today. Some of us would get there ahead of the rest. The food looks pretty tasty, so those start snacking. Then they snack a little more. And they have another glass of wine. By the time the counters get there, there are only crumbs and a few drops of wine in the bottom of the bottle!

Paul admonishes the Corinthians that this is not at all what the Lord’s Supper is about. He reminds them of the words of Jesus, what we now call the words of institution. Again, we’ll hear more about Jesus’ words next week.

For now, we know that a liturgy, set words to say at this special gathering of followers of Jesus, was becoming ritualized. As the words for the Passover blessings were the same for all, now the words for the Christian observance of the Lord’s Supper were also becoming the same for all.

Paul says that someone outside of their group needs to tell them how to honor this meal. If they thought about it on their own, they would not change. But because Paul speaks as the Lord has taught him, they need to take his advice and change for the good of all.

This continued to be an issue in the 3rd century church of Hippolytus. We heard last Sunday about his written liturgy for baptism. He also wrote about communion.

People who were not baptized were literally locked out of the church before communion began. This was a meal for only those who were baptized into the church.

Communion did not include all the foods from the Passover meal, but it did have a bit more than we use today. They used bread as the body of Christ. However, they used three cups, each containing something different.

First, the person communing would drink from a cup of water. This was to remind them of their baptism and to make way within them for the next drink. The second cup contained a mixture of milk and honey. The phrase “a land of milk and honey” was common in the Israelites’ vision of the promised land and so becomes a reminder of the promises of God made to the patriarchs of the Old Testament. Finally came the wine, which of course, is Jesus’ blood.

Each communing person would drink from each cup three times. (Think how long communion would take if we did that!) The person with the water would say…In God the Father Almighty. The one with the milk and honey would say….And in the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, the person with the wine would say….And in the Holy Spirit and in the Holy Church. The one receiving would respond with Amen.

Hippolytus apparently had some who needed discipline as Paul had to administer to the Corinthians. He includes in his writing to eat and drink in moderation. They aren’t there to get drunk on the wine. They aren’t there to get their stomachs full of bread.

Kids in First Communion sometimes get concerned that they will get drunk on the wine. I assure them that the small amount they receive will not make them drunk. I always have them taste the wine before they receive their first communion. A big reason is to try to prevent that “yuck!” face they tend to make. It’s always interesting to find that one child who actually likes the taste of the wine. I warn their parents to watch out for them in later years!

Our communion today could never be considered a whole meal. Sometimes you might find me giving you a bigger piece of bread than you expected. That’s mostly just because of how it broke off the loaf. I had a pastor once who would give you such a big piece that we joked we could make a sandwich if we had some peanut butter.

However our Lutheran understanding of Holy Communion is that it IS a whole meal. That little bite of bread and sip of wine are the foods of the great banquet that God provides for us. With Jesus in, through and under the bread and wine, the meal is complete and meets our every need. When we come to the communion table, we dine with Jesus, both the host and the sacrifice of the meal.

The history of God’s people includes a history of food. Bread is the food that sustained the people from Adam and Eve forward. Whether unleavened or leavened or in the form of manna in the wilderness, bread remains a universal food.

The gospels include many stories of Jesus and food. Jesus often dines with others, usually those who are looked down upon for some reason. Today’s gospel tells of Jesus eating with Levi, who is often thought to be the disciple Matthew.

Having just called Levi as a disciple, Jesus is treated to a great banquet at Levi’s house. Being a tax collector, Levi’s circle of friends is made up of tax collectors and others who do not mind being seen with one. They are probably having a very nice time, eating and drinking and talking about whatever tax collectors talk about. Jesus is the honored guest, also enjoying their company.

From outside the circle, the Pharisees question the disciples. Why do you eat and drink with tax-collectors and sinners? Who one ate with was critical in the social life of Israel. You always wanted to try to move up the social ladder, to have more “upper crust” people at your table.

Jesus responds with a central theme in Luke. He says that he has come not for the righteous but for the sinners. As Paul tells the Corinthians, his discipline is only because he wants to make them better. Jesus does the same. Jesus comes to call the sinners to repentance, not to only be with those who need no repentance.

The common table of Holy Communion reminds us that there are none who need no repentance. We all come with open hands to receive what Jesus has to give to us. Jesus invites us and all people to his table. Jesus offers himself in the bread and wine.

Whether it is pizza or shrimp or roast beef or even the biscuits that we crave as our special foods, there is none that we crave more than the food that gives us life. This simple meal of bread and wine links us to the providing God of Adam and Eve. It links us to the unleavened bread of the Exodus and the sustaining manna in the wilderness. It links us to generations upon generations who have gathered together to share the Lord’s supper.

And ultimately, it links us to the salvation provided in the body and blood of Jesus. With this bread and wine, we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. His death calls us forward into life, a life where there is no hunger or thirst for we feast at Jesus’ table. We feast on his body and blood, given and shed for us. We taste and see that the Lord is good. Amen.