

# Do THIS...

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**John Wilkinson Third Presbyterian Church**  
**June 2, 2013 I Corinthians 11:17-33**

Soon our “Year of Feasting” will conclude. This program year, beginning last September, was dubbed “A Year of Feasting.” We embraced a new children and adult curriculum called “Feasting on the Word.” Based on our inReach recommendations, we organized several new fellowship and congregational gatherings. We focused on local and global hunger in particular ways. We named our stewardship effort “By Whose Bounty All Are Blest,” from our familiar offering response. We sought ways – big and small – to remind ourselves of the feast of faith to which we have been called and which we are called to share.

Soon a “Year of Feasting” will give way to a new program year, “A Year of Growing.” In one way, a year of feasting *would* naturally lead to a certain kind of a year of growing, but let’s not focus on that too much.

Growing, beginning in September, will consider many things – how we might grow in terms of membership and financial vitality, but also how we might grow in our ability to serve, or in the breadth and depth of our spiritual life.

No doubt you remember that for several communion Sundays, I spoke in a focused way about communion itself. That seemed like the thing to do in a year of feasting. Communion. The Lord’s Supper. Eucharist. This is the fourth of four such conversations, hardly a series, but at the same time a good opportunity to remind ourselves why we do what we do and how we do what we do.

In those conversations I reminded us that this is, first and foremost, a meal, a simple meal with friends, a joyful feast, through which and by which we are called to REMEMBER many things. I used familiar words in church-y ways: mystery, presence, foretaste.

I reminded us as well that this sacrament has ethical implications for us, for hundreds of millions of world citizens, millions of Americans, including children, and thousands of neighbors, who do not have enough food. I said then and I believe it now that we have a moral responsibility, whenever we experience the abundance of this table, to feed those in need. I also reminded us – a good reminder this morning as we celebrate our extensive outreach ministry – that as we feed we are fed.

I don’t know what you think of when it comes time for communion. What this year has invited me to do is to think about it more intentionally and mindfully. It has invited me to look back at

what our forbears have believed and practiced. I have read about communion more than I usually do, and read things I have not read in a very long time.

It matters, and it matters a great deal. Much of my reading, and thinking, and practicing, however, has reminded me that some of what has mattered so much to us over decades and centuries has perhaps mattered too much. Not to throw theology out the window or under the bus or down the drain or whatever, but in thinking about all of this in the context of this faith community's life has reminded me how central and critical the communal aspect of communion is, that while thinking about it is important, actually breaking bread and pouring the cup matters even more.

I get that not because religion is evolving and faith practices are shifting, though they are. I get that from the original story itself. I have gone off the lectionary today, so that you have heard an extended reading from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. There are problems in Corinth. The problems are about how people are treating one another in the church; those problems are *presenting* themselves in the way that the Lord's Supper is being celebrated. The body is divided, fighting and quarreling, and it is polluting their worship life, their gatherings at Christ's table. There are factions who are looking out for themselves, neglecting the needs of others.

And Paul lambastes them. It would be better if you just stayed home than show up and insult God and humiliate others, he says. Pretty strong stuff.

Paul then rehearses what happened. He remembers the familiar story, what Jesus said and did. He uses central words: thanks, remembrance, covenant. These are important words to remember.

Then he returns to lambasting mode. Be worthy, he says, not so much worthy in what you believe, but in how you behave, how you treat one another. He tells the new church to "discern the body." Look around, he says. Who has needs, who has wants, who is hurting physically and emotionally and spiritually. Look around and discern the body. Exhibit good table manners, he says. Not about which fork goes where, or keeping your elbows off the table as I as regularly admonished as a kid, but the kind of good table manners that attend to communal life, within the church and beyond it.

How will we do that? And how will our theology and ethics, our belief and practice, so come together so as to make this meal a true gospel feast?

I read about a gathering north of London – a kind of atheist church. People show up. There are readings, a lecture, even an offering to care for the facility. Later the group will organize for community service. One participant said that "It's got all the good things about church without the terrible dogma." (*Christian Century*, March 20, 2013)

Rowan Williams, who was concluding his service as the head of the Anglican Church before returning to teach, debated the noted atheist Richard Dawkins. The topic was this: "Religion has no place in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." Williams said that religion had always been about community building, compassion and inclusion. Dawkins said that religion is a cop-out. Williams won the debate 324-136, but you get the point. (*Christian Century*, March 6, 2013)

We read day by day that religion is in decline, both for external and internal reasons. And yet we know, we who are here, that we have been given a precious gift, faith, the church, a vision and mission. How will our dogma matter, without becoming dogmatic, our faith, our belief, to a world aching for good news? And how will all that we do embrace community building, compassion and inclusion? How will we feed and be fed?

Examine yourselves, Paul said. On the Saturdays before communion Sundays in the Scottish church, ministers and elders would go out and visit church members. They examined them to see if they were ready and worthy to receive the sacrament. If they were deemed ready, they were given a small coin, called a "communion token," that they presented the next morning. I have a few of them. Those who received a token sat in the front of the sanctuary; those who didn't sat in the rear. It was called "fencing the table." Sometimes actual "fences" or barriers were created – wood or even, somewhat ironically, lovely linen. They might as well have been barbed wire.

Examine yourselves. What does Paul mean? Not fencing the table, heavens no! Can you imagine? I can imagine, however, each of us taking time on a communion Saturday to think and reflect, or a few minutes as a prelude is played at the outset of worship. How am I prepared today? How *am* I – heart and soul – as I approach the table? How will I share the abundance I receive this morning?

There are other questions. Earlier this year I asked on Facebook if you all had communion questions. You did. Some of you asked about children participating – when and how. Some of you want intinction more often; some of you never want intinction again – thanks for that, by the way! Some of you asked why we do not celebrate the sacrament more regularly – in fact, John Calvin said that weekly Lord's Supper was a good idea. One of you asked about those words – "do this in remembrance of me." If I am at dinner at a friend's house, you asked, why can't we do that? Why does serving communion have to be done by those ordained to a church leadership position and be pre-approved by session?

You are all asking, it seems to me, good questions about how what we have believed and continue to believe might matter, and not get in the way of faith that is communal, compassionate, inclusive.

Consider three scenarios...

- Every summer we participate in an outdoor Vacation Bible School with New Life Presbyterian Church. We offer simple snacks beforehand and the kids from the Upper

Monroe neighborhood show up and devour them. I don't know if it's communion, but it's certainly communal.

- Or this past Maundy Thursday, when we had remembered Jesus' last supper and exited the dark sanctuary in silence, three of us, my dad, my mom and me, got in a car and – because our house doesn't have cable TV – found an establishment that was showing the Ohio State March Madness game. We saw most of the second half, drinking diet Coke and eating onion rings, cheering the Buckeyes on to a nail-biting victory. I don't know if it was Eucharist, but it was certainly Eucharistic.
- As we gather on the lawn today for the Big Lunch, and eat hot dogs and ice cream (two of the four food groups!), and share company, and welcome neighbors, I don't know if it will be the sacrament, but it will certainly be sacramental.

The theologian Brian Gerrish says that all theology is Eucharistic theology – that all we do should reflect our grateful response to God who is gracious always, that all of life should reflect the promise and vision of this table. How can we make that be?

The Confession of 1967, which we studied this morning, says that all theology moves toward reconciliation – how we are reconciled to God and to one another, made whole, made right. How can what happens here in a few moments make that be, and spill over into all of life?

This morning, as Jesus says DO THIS, perhaps we might examine ourselves, not for worthiness, but for readiness, and for openness. Perhaps we might listen to the words and music in new ways. Perhaps we taste the bread with deepened attentiveness, and drink the cup. Perhaps we might look around and take note of who is here and who is not, and why. Perhaps we let this ritual not become ritualized, but allow it to be alive, and transforming, until all of God's children have a place at the table, and we are fed, fed until we want no more. Amen.