

UUFCC Service February 5, 2006

A New Taste of Communion

Helen B. Volz

Chalice Lighting - *Maryell Cleary*

Long ago the chalice of communion wine was set apart for the priests alone.

We would have all share in the bounty of the earth: wine and milk, bread and meat, that no one may go hungry.

Long ago those who spoke their minds freely were put to death by fire.

We would use fire to warm all bodies and light all minds.

Long ago freedom-loving people put flames upon a chalice as a symbol of freedom and sharing for all.

As we light this flame, so we dedicate ourselves to freedom and sharing.

Source: 1997 UUMA Worship Materials Collection

Opening Words

First of all let me say that when we started planning the services to be held during Mark's absence, I never intended to be responsible for three services in four weeks. But due to the need for some rescheduling it turned out that way. I must say it has given me a far greater appreciation for the work Mark does week in and week out. As far as I know this will be my last appearance for awhile.

Also we have made a small change in the order of service. The special music will be right before the offering instead of after it.

As a child in the Methodist Church, communion was for me a solemn and mysterious affair. I attended church with my mother, since both adults and children went to Sunday school in the hour before the church service. With organ music softly playing in the background, the ushers quietly stepped up to the row where we sat and touched the end of the pew. Then all the adults left the pew, walked to the front and knelt on velvet cushions around the altar. The minister passed bread cubes and grape juice in the silver communion set. He said some words and they ate the bread cubes. Then he said some more words

and they drank the juice from tiny glass cups. I understood that this was an adult ritual and that when I was older, I too would be able to participate in it.

Not so though when I was about four and we attended the United Church of Canada near our cottage in Ontario. There they passed the juice and bread crumbs in the pews right under my nose and I was most upset that I was not allowed to have any “refreshments”.

I begged to be allowed to join the church early and finally the minister took me into the preparatory class with the boys and girls who were a year ahead of me in school. Looking back, I’m not exactly sure why this was so important to me, but I think the sense of holiness I had watching the communion being served was a part of it.

I was quite surprised when I went back to the Methodist church after 30 years away and found that communion was now open to all and that it was sometimes presented by intinction, where each participant dipped a chunk of bread into a common goblet of grape juice. I also found out, by the way, that the founder of Welch’s grape juice, was a Methodist who knew an opportunity when he saw one and began to promote his product to churches when prohibition started. Then I began really listening to the words and communion no longer had the sense of the sacred that it did when I was a child.

I was uncomfortable with my adult experience of communion, but I also felt that descriptions of our coffee hour as “UU communion” trivialized what communion might be. Several years ago when the UU Christian group was active we read the book Rabbi Jesus by Bruce Chilton. Finally I found an explanation of communion that made sense to me as an adult. Later we read The Communion Book by the Association of Unitarian Universalist Ministers. As we carried out a few of these simple rituals I once again felt some of the sense of the sacred that I had when I was younger. What I hope to do in this service is give you a different view of communion and provide a new type of communion experience for those of you who wish to participate.

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Congregational Comments

Let’s start by having all who have taken communion at some point raise hands. Now if a few of you are willing to briefly share any experiences you had I’d like to start with that. Please say your name and the name of the denomination because customs vary widely. Laura will bring the microphone around.

Getting Rid of Grisly Images

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "Communion" as "a Sharing, especially of thoughts, etc. ; fellowship."—all good ideas that UUs could support. But of course this isn't "Holy" communion.

The biblical foundation for Holy Communion is what Jesus supposedly did and said at the Last Supper. The commonly accepted, although most likely not historically correct story, is that Jesus gathered his disciples together for the traditional Jewish Seder at Passover. He wanted to break the news to them that his days were most likely numbered since he was becoming increasingly troublesome to the Romans and to the Temple hierarchy.

The story is told this way in the Revised English version of the Gospel of Matthew ch. 26:26-28:

During supper, Jesus took bread and having said the blessing, he broke and gave it to the disciples with the words: "Take this and eat, this is my Body." Then he took a cup, and having offered thanks to God then gave it to them with the words: "Drink from it all of you. For this is my blood, the blood of the covenants shed for many for the forgiveness of sins." Other translations of the Bible say pretty much the same thing.

Not suprisingly, however, modern Biblical scholars are reasonably sure that we do not know exactly what Jesus said or whether he was even celebrating a Passover meal, or predicting his own death. This could have been just another meal together with his friends. Other scholars note that whatever the situation was, Jesus never intended this as a ritual to be repeated for all time. Our own Ralph Waldo Emerson held this belief and in 1832 preached a sermon to his Unitarian congregation about why he could no longer continue the communion ritual.

When I became an adult I was bothered not only by the imagery of "body and blood" but the idea that a human being was believed to have been sacrificed 2000 years ago for the sins of the world, past and future. As I worked on this talk I did, however, by picking and choosing find a few things about communion that I was comfortable with.

Communion is also called "Eucharist" a word from the ancient Greek language meaning "to give thanks" or "thanksgiving." I like the idea of communion as a Thanksgiving. I often feel we UUs are not thankful enough for the lives of privilege that we lead. With no effort on our own part most of us were born to parents who did not have to worry whether there would be food to eat or a place to live. Generally they were parents who cared for us and who valued education. I like the idea of a ritual of thankfulness.

One of the descriptions of communion on the United Church of Christ web site is "...an intimate experience of fellowship in which the whole church in every time and place is present and divisions are overcome." I like the idea of an intimate experience of fellowship.

Even a statement by the Council of Florence, from November 22, 1439 quoted in the Catholic Pocket Chatecism had some words that appealed to me.

So, too, the church officially teaches that "Every effect which bodily food and bodily drink produce in our corporeal life, by preserving this life, increasing this life, healing this life, and satisfying this life - is also produced by this Sacrament in the spiritual life". I like the idea of a ritual which nurtures the spirit.

Long before the Christian communion was celebrated ancient people knew that offering food was how you made friends with others, human or divine. They built altars -- which were really tables -- for the gods. And they offered food on the tables, knowing that to sit at their goddess' table was to be their goddess' friend.

Most religions around the world still include food in their rituals. The Shintoists offer fruit and vegetables to the Kami; Buddhists put a bowl of rice before the statue of Gautama. Sikhs share a special pudding in their temples; Jews ask God to bless bread and wine on Friday night. We westerners have the cutting of the wedding cake by the bride and groom. Here at the UUFCC we celebrate a Seder each year. I like the idea of a holy meal too.

But how did this idea of the body and blood get started? The earliest guide to Christian living was the Didache, probably written in Syria in about 60 CE. It mentions daily prayers as well as gathering on the Sabbath to break bread and give thanks. There's no mention of body and blood.

Descriptions of Christian worship written by an early church father, Justin Martyr, to the Roman Emperor in 155 CE refer to praying together and sharing bread, wine and water, but initially say nothing about "the body and the blood."

Long before Christians celebrated communion, however, there were rituals involving blood. Ceremonies surrounding the god Mithra can be traced back nearly 4000 years. This religion was especially popular with the Roman soldiers and sometime in the second century it became Rome's official state religion and remained until Christianity replaced it. In the Mithrian temples there was usually an image of the god killing a bull. One of the Mithrian's practices involved an individual being put into a pit where he was showered with the blood of a bull and thus was believed to be "reborn into eternity." Another involved eating the flesh of the bull and drinking its blood in the belief that the participants would be born again and have eternal life. Like many other pagan rituals that were blended into or adopted by the early Christian church this may have been one source for the body and blood idea.

In the book Rabbi Jesus Bruce Chilton noted that several Pagan mystery cults of the Greco-Roman world were quick to adopt what later became known as the Eucharist because it fit in so well with their own mythology. To the Hellenistic Christians these stories about Jesus' bread and wine being his body and blood supported the idea that he was yet another god who gave himself that they might have eternal life. They believed the bread and wine became his body and blood after they consumed them. Of course animal sacrifice at the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was an ongoing event during Jesus lifetime and this was one of the practices he opposed.

Chilton believes that in the days before Jesus death he had more frequent meals with his disciples and began to speak of sharing his blood and flesh. But he does not believe that Jesus in any way meant this literally. In fact he cites Jewish writings that indicate that even the thought of drinking blood was blasphemous and would have been a strong rejection of Judaism.

After years of working with Aramaic sources and anthropological studies of sacrifice Chilton came up with a new view of the communion ritual. These more frequent meals were Jesus' last desperate attempts to insist that his own meals were better sacrifices than what was offered in Caiaphus' corrupt temple. People did not have to make sacrifices at the Temple and deal with the money changers and the stink of burning flesh. They could have their own holy meals.

The sentence from Chilton that I connected to was, "When Israelites shared wine and bread in celebration of their own purity and the presence of the Kingdom, God delighted in that more than in the blood and flesh on the altar in the Temple."

I realize and respect that for some in other faiths the mystery of the communion ritual is the essence of their religious life. But I like being in a church where I can build my own theology and here's what communion means to me now: It has nothing to do with anyone's body and blood. It doesn't have to have anything to do with Jesus or God. It has to do with thanksgiving--our gratitude for the goodness we have received, by grace, from others, from this community. It is a reminder that we have more to be thankful for than most of us can ever acknowledge.

The element of sacrifice is not about anyone dying for our sins, it is about our giving of ourselves to each other and to the greater world. It is a reminder of our intent to reach out to others and be the best we can be. It is the realization that we are our brother and sisters' keepers. When we ring the bells at Christmastime for the Interfaith Mission we are sacrificing time at home with our families. When Bob Newnham stands with his candle for peace at the Campus gate on Wednesday nights he is sacrificing time that is precious. When members give up weekend time to care for this building it is a sacrifice. This

community will only be sustained by our sacrifices. The only way to make the world better is through our sacrifices.

UU Communion

Communion is a part of our UU history. Initially both the Unitarians and the Universalists celebrated communion, although the Universalists tended to be less strict about it. Members were not required to take communion and if a Universalist minister did not choose to celebrate communion he could ask a nearby colleague to come in and conduct the service for him. A 1938 survey of Unitarian ministers showed that about half of them celebrated communion. Some of them had made up their own rituals and others were using traditional Unitarian resources.

By the time the Unitarians and the Universalists merged in 1961 the celebration of communion was dwindling at a rapid rate. But then the pendulum swung the other way in the '70s and '80s and there was a renewed interest in communion. The Communion Book was published in 1993 by the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association and edited by Carl Seaburg. At the end of the book's introductory chapters Seaburg writes, "If we believe that religion affirms all of life as holy then we need rituals that will connect us to that holiness. Perhaps the new forms of communion will do that."

Our UU Communion Book has all sorts of communion rituals in it--cornbread and cider communion for Thanksgiving, a shell communion, a salt communion, a maple syrup communion, a humanist communion, a Gnostic communion, a Passover communion, several children's communions and many others. There are also traditional, but perhaps more modern Anglican, Moravian and Catholic communions. Peter Lanzillotta, who many of you remember as an interim minister here at the Fellowship contributed a liberal Christian Communion to the book.

What we call our water service in the fall, some congregations call a water communion. Many congregations have a flower communion in the spring where individuals bring flowers to the service. We did this at least once since I've been attending the Fellowship.

A number of the UU Communion rituals that involve food discuss the bread that is to be served, remembering those who helped grow the grain, process it and bake the bread. There are even some that, borrowing from the Christian language, talk about the grain having to die or be killed in order to come to us in a life giving form. The same types of things are said in some of the services about the juice or wine served.

A Celebration of Thanksgiving and Sacrifice

I looked through many different rituals before I found one that I felt would be compatible to my earlier definition of communion as a celebration of thanksgiving and sacrifice. It is called a rice cake communion and was developed by Barbara Hebner. I have adapted it for today.

Rice is a humble grain, but nevertheless it has sustained millions of the world's people for countless years. Now I want you to visualize a rice cake. It's not like a cookie or cracker that's made from batter—where each ingredient loses its identity to become a part of the whole. In a rice cake we can see each grain, just as we can look around and see each individual in our community. But we can also see that it is not made up of a group of identical grains. The shape of each grain is a little different. Each one has been bent and shaped by the grains around it, in the same way we have been shaped by our contact with others in this community. Not all grains are in contact with each other. Some are on opposite sides of the cake, but all are needed to make up the whole and to shape the cake.

Think about the rice cake as a symbol of community and thankfulness as we pass them to you. Please take one if you are so inclined and hold it so that we can all eat together. If you do not wish to participate sit quietly and listen to Spirit of Life or softly sing along.

For rice cakes: *Take and eat this in thankfulness for this community and for the many gifts each of us has received.*

I had a hard time deciding what drink to serve during this service and finally chose water. Without water there is no life. Many religions use the imagery of water to signify cleansing and renewal. These brief words from the Ashtavakra Gita are very meaningful to me.

The sorrows of duty,
Like the heat of the sun,
Have scorched your heart.

But let stillness fall on you
With its sweet and cooling showers,
And you will find happiness.

As the cups are passed let the quiet fall on you like showers of renewal and once again wait to drink until everyone has been served.

For the water: *Take and drink this as a symbol of refreshment and renewal that will enable us to give of ourselves for this community and the greater world.*

Extinguishing the Chalice

May the love that makes life beautiful,
the reverence that makes life holy,
and the truth that makes us free,
Lead us onwards together into a deepening
And growing communion of life. Blessed be.

Jacob Trapp