



“This Eucharistic Life”

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 53:2-5; 1 Corinthians 11:20-26; John 6:32-35

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

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Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Samantha Gonzalez-Block, & Richard Coble

RC: So, there’s a table, one plate, one chalice and a pitcher. Familiar images—most people recognize them as something religious, churchy maybe.

MMS: Stoic Elders alternately passing trays with tasteless flat crisps of something that was supposed to be bread or a bunch of little thimbles full of grape juice. When I was little my mom always reached over me to get the tray with the thimbles of juice. She didn’t want me to spill them or drop it by accident. That would have been horrible—all that noise and mess in the middle of this thing that seemed really serious and sad. Kinda like a funeral.

SGB: We always had to wait. The Communion bread had to be taken together, so we had to wait for it to be passed out to every adult or Confirmed youth before eating it. As a child, I watched as those sitting beside me dutifully waited: forming their small squares of bread into cubes and animal-shapes, passing the time until the pastor gave the signal for everyone to eat. Well, not everyone. In my church, the Eucharist was a coming of age Sacrament - something far off in the distance, something reserved for “the mature” and “the Confirmed,” something that would be mine to experience *one day*. I just had to wait.

RC: People all over the world do it. For almost 2000 years it’s been happening over and over again.

SGB: I never really felt a whole lot when we had Communion at church when I was growing up. It felt really formal, disconnected from me.

MMS: It didn’t feel very mysterious or Holy or anything. Mostly somber. The minister had to read from a book to tell us what we were doing. It didn’t really seem like his heart was in it.

RC: What brings people to this Table—for all these years, across all these cultures? Are they just going through the motions? Or is there some deeper meaning or some kind of spiritual benefit that comes out of this?

SGB: I still remember when it happened. When I felt something different.

MMS: I was startled by the mystery that had been patiently waiting for me to notice, to receive.

RC: From GCPC, in Asheville, NC

MMS: It's "This Eucharistic Life"

SGB: The Lord's Supper in Three Parts

(Leonard strums--the first stanza of "For Everyone Born" without the refrain while MMS RC AND SGB WALK IN FROM NATHEX)

(MMS, RC, and SGB get to table)

RC: A Table, one plate

MMS: One chalice

SGB: and a pitcher

RC: Act 1--To Belong or Not to Belong

SGB: (Describe story of Eucharist) **[RC to pulpit side steps; MMS & SGB to stools]**

SGB: I am sitting in church and I am 14. It's a tall steeple church in the suburbs, formal, but warm - the church where I was baptized. It's Eucharist time on Sunday and once again the table feels distant from me. As the tray of bread and cup are passed down my pew, they might as well be miles away. Eating the bread and drinking the cup, are more fun actions than meaningful ones. *Free food in church!* And finally I am old enough, seemingly faithful enough to partake of it beside my mother.

But the truth is, at Eucharist time I feel nothing. Something must be wrong with me, I think. I feel like an outsider looking in, wondering if and when I will finally feel what I was *supposed to* feel when eating this bread and drinking this cup. I wonder if I am a fraud (and if anyone knows it). Confirmed and still filled with doubts and uncertainty, harboring mistakes and secrets, feeling empty when I am supposed to be feeling filled. I wonder, do I really belong at this table? Is this meal really meant for me? Will I ever taste Christ's invitation and be filled and fed by God's love?

RC: That's a lonely feeling - and I imagine a common one. We talk about this being a table for all, but it does not always feel that way. Sometimes we can feel like we are the only one with doubts or we are missing something that everyone else must be experiencing. Sometimes we can feel apart from it all.

MMS: So did you ever feel truly a part of it?

SGB: Yes. It was Maundy Thursday. Now, I am 23 and it is the first time I ever experience intinction - when we dip the bread in the cup. My pew is welcomed forward and I stand before the pastor. He looks at me in the eyes and says, "The bread of life broken for you, Sam and the cup the salvation shed for you, Sam." This is the first time in my life that anyone has ever looked at me in the eyes during Communion, that anyone has said my name, and that has said that this is for me."

MMS: So, just that slight shift in body language or in the words used, really made a difference for you?

SGB: It may sound trivial, but those things change everything. Suddenly, I realize that Jesus died *for me*. His love was so expansive, so radical that he can make room for me - and for all of us. After this experience, the table feels so close. I can almost see Jesus sitting there, inviting me over, asking me to sit, offering me bread and cup by name, looking into my eyes - reminding me that all this sacrifice and love is for me, for us. It's an extraordinary thing: to be welcomed, as I am, alongside this community filled with struggling souls - to share in a meal that can transform our lives forever.

RC: How many places, do we have, really, where we can actually show up as ourselves? Where we really feel like we belong? It can be hard to imagine that there is a place for all of us at this table. Hard to imagine that there is enough room for all that we carry, that Jesus can make space for each of us - exactly as we are.

MMS: (to SGB) It sounds like hearing your name, having someone look you in the eye really made you feel welcome. [to congregation] I wonder, what makes you feel welcome? (***Sam moves to table***)

RC [**& MMS next to table, off to the sides, SGB in middle of table**]: Feeling truly welcome is a rare experience. Maybe that's what makes this table so powerful and promising, across thousands of years and even today.

MMS: (to side of table) So how can we trust we are really welcome here?

SGB: Actual Invitation to the Table

Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God! People will come from north and south, east and west to sit at table with our Lord. Our Savior invites all those who trust him, and all those who long to trust in him, to come and share in this meal which has been prepared for each and everyone of us. Jesus is seated at this table and there is a place for you.

RC [to table]: We trust that we are welcome at this table when we see, and experience, and feel that God gives freely here, without preconditions, grace alone rather than judgment.

MMS [to table]: Jesus sat down and shared meals with the excluded, the wounded, the confused, the lonely, the distracted. He broke bread with those who had betrayed him, those who had disappointed and hurt him. All of Jesus' table encounters hover in and around this table to call us each here--come as you are, from whatever you come from, come honest, come hungry, and you, too, can find freedom here.

SGB: Jesus invites us together to this table because of our brokenness, because of who we are, to experience his body ready to be broken for us. Here at this table, we experience a love that holds and mends, inspires and shapes us, fills and shifts our lives as individuals and as a community.

MMS: As we prepare to experience God's grace at this table once again let us join our voices in song.

HYMN sing (*Leonard plays and during song ushers and youth bring in elements. MMS, RC, and SGB arrange on the Table*)

Marcia: Act 2: Like a Prayer, I'll take you there.

(MMS go to pulpit, RC and SGB to stools)

RC: It's a grizzly scene, hardly a preacher's favorite, more Game of Thrones than Godly Play - a bible story full of palace intrigue, problematic lust, and in the end of it, a guy loses his head. And not just any guy, but John the Baptist. At the beginning of Mark ch. 6, Herod throws the Baptizer in jail when John condemns the king for marrying his sister-in-law Herodias. Despite that, Herod actually likes John. He likes to hear him preach, so Herod keeps him alive, which really peeves his wife and sister-in-law Herodias.

MMS: [pulpit, Bible reading] But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his step-daughter came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, "Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it." And he solemnly swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom." Herod's step-daughter went out and said to her mother, "What should I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the baptizer."

Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, "I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter." The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her.

SGB: [next to RC, interview style, both on stools] So why are you bringing this up now? It's not exactly Palooza material.

RC: I'd never really paid much attention to this weird story before, until our Bible study in Mark this summer, when we read through the whole book. Going chapter by chapter, we noticed how Mark juxtaposes this grotesque bible story of John's beheading with Jesus's feeding of the five thousand; they come right after each other.

SGB: Ah, an old favorite. How do these stories contrast with each other?

MMS: "You give them something to eat." Jesus said. And the disciples responded, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish.

RC: If you just read this story in isolation, you miss the point. The gospel pairs the two stories because the second critiques the first. In the halls of power, it's everyone for themselves, where life is about getting one up on another. It's a deceitful place of murder and lies, where prophets are silenced and killed. Contrast that with Jesus's feast, where all who are hungry are fed, where scarcity becomes abundance, where the eyes of faith open us up to unexpected possibilities. It's a different way of being with one another, of serving one another, of being faithful to one another.

MMS: We don't want to admit it, do we? We cringe when we read that story of Herod's violence, but when we're honest, violence, deceit, competition, these are common ways to solve our problems. It's how we've been doing it for all of human history. (sit down on steps)

SGB: So you're saying, shepherding, protection, love contrasted with Herod's self-interest, is that what we're getting at here?

RC: What's challenging is to see through the eyes of faith that there is enough. That we are enough. And in gratitude, we are called to share rather than hoard, to be partners with one another in the hardships of life, rather than competitors.

SGB: That's really different than the world we live in. [going out to congregation]: Can you say one word about how the feeding of the five thousand, this story of enough, makes you feel?

RC [**all to table**]: The story of the five thousand is a Eucharist story, a story of abundance and thanksgiving that stands in critique of our world of scarcity, violence, and war.

MMS: Fellowship in contrast to borders and walls.

SGB: Thanksgiving in contrast to scapegoating and dehumanization.

RC: And This table is where that feast comes alive for us, as a new way of being together, right now. So we always pause when we gather at this table to give thanks for all the ways God provides for us.

RC: The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

MMS: Lift up your hearts. **We lift them TO the Lord.**

SGB: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. **It is right to give our thanks and praise.**

RC: For when your spirit hovered over the waters, and graciously brought forth land and life, darkness and light, warmth and cold out of nothing, we give you thanks, O God.

MMS: For Jesus the Christ who showed us a new way of life, of boundless generosity, of grace and service, of prophecy and condemnation of abuse and oppression, we give you thanks, O God.

SGB: For these elements of bread and cup, which your Spirit infuses with power offered to us to see you and one another through the eyes of faith, in love, in partnership, we give you thanks, O God. And so, we catch a glimpse of you in this meal, following your way in our ways of being the church, your body, praying the words you taught to us, saying: **Our Father...**

(Leonard strums refrain of “For Everyone Born”--and God will delight when we are creators of justice)

(MMS, RC, and SGB do tearing of bread and pouring of cup while the music plays)

SGB: Act 3: Mystical Mystery Tour

MMS: I never in a million years expected it to be something that could feed my soul and enliven my faith like it did. 1000s of pages that John Calvin wrote back in the 16th century and called uninspirely “The Institutes of Christian Religion.” Honestly reading most of that book was like alternating between reading the yellow pages and reading a diatribe against all things human. So, by the time I got to Book 4, Chapter 17--that’s over 1000 pages in, I was just trying to get through it. I was a dutiful student and had a strong will, so I was going to finish!

RC: Book 4, Chapter 17 “Of the Lord’s Supper and the Benefits Conferred By It”

MMS: Just a few lines in I start reading words like “our souls feed” and “living bread” and “great mystery” and “refreshed” and “vigour.”

RC: “God has given another sacrament to his Church...a spiritual feast, at which Christ is living bread on which our souls feed for a true and blessed immortality... Christ is the only food of our soul, and therefore God invites us to Christ, that, refreshed by communion with him, we may ever and anon gather new vigour.”

MMS: It had never occurred to me that Communion could be soul food, mysterious, refreshing, invigorating. In the midst of schlogging through that dry academic text, a whole new expectation was created in me about the gift of this sacrament.

SGB: Calvin’s words did all that?

MMS: It’s not just the words, but the mystery they pointed toward. The theology Calvin laid underneath the sacrament made me hungry for that mystery--and it emboldened me to expect more from the practice of the sacrament. Calvin may be rolling over in his grave right now to know this, but his words freed me up to call the church to be accountable to the amazing, embodied mystery that is available to us in our practice of the sacrament.

RC: “...by faith we embrace Christ, not as appearing at a distance, but as uniting himself to us, ... As bread nourishes, sustains, and protects our bodily life, so the body of Christ is the

only food to invigorate and keep alive the soul. When we behold wine set forth as a symbol of blood, we must think that such use as wine serves to the body, the same is spiritually bestowed by the blood of Christ, and to use it to foster, refresh, strengthen and exhilarate.”

MMS: Exhilarate! Just bringing a word like that into relationship with the sacrament gave me a new sense of possibility for the likes of us! Calvin didn’t believe in anything like a private Communion--it is an act of the community--when we come together in Christ’s name with our hearts open to the Spirit’s mysterious capacity to transform us--we, the community, the gathered people of God, we become the Body of Christ in the world. Christ’s body isn’t in the bread or in the cup, but in the way we are together, the way we eat this meal together.

SGB: That is a powerful mystery (to the congregation) What does it mean for the church to be the body of Christ in the world?

RC: “... the full communion with Christ goes beyond their description, which is too confined... it is a mystery I am unable to comprehend with my mind, so far am I from wishing any one to measure its sublimity by my feeble capacity. [go out] Nay, I rather exhort my readers not to confine their apprehension within those narrow limits, but to attempt to rise much higher than I can guide them... All then that remains is to break forth in admiration of the mystery.”

MMS: (picking up the bread)

SGB: On the night of his arrest, Jesus called his friends, his chosen family, to gather at table with him.

RC: And after blessing the bread, he broke it, saying “this is my body, broken for you. Take. Eat.”

MMS: And we do this re-remembering him.

MMS: (picking up the chalice)

SGB: In the same way, he took the cup.

RC: Saying “this cup is the covenant sealed in my blood, poured out for you. Drink it. All of you.”

MMS: And we do this re-remembering him.

MMS: (holding bread and cup) Whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup together, we do show forth the saving life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, until he comes again.

RC: These are the gifts of God

SGB: For the people of God. (Communion is served)

SGB: This Fall we will gather around this table every week trusting that the Spirit will guide us and this sacrament will nourish us just the way we need to be as a community.

SGB: Let us pray. God our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, May this table continue to call our name, to invite us in, to offer us a chair, a community and a home.

RC: May this table always be a challenge to us, may its abundance confront and critique our ways of living in scarcity; may it empower us to respond in thanksgiving.

MMS: And thank you for the mysteries of how we are fed and formed when we share this sacred meal together. Thank you for your unique power to transform us and empower us to be the Body of Christ set loose in the world. Amen.

RC: Eucharist is not just something we do, it's who we are. When we feast at the Lord's table, we want to respond in gratitude.

MMS: And so we do respond, by sharing our lives, sharing our gifts, sharing our resources, sharing Christ's love.

SGB: And we do that now with our offering, and in countless other ways in the days, weeks, and months to come.

RC: From GCPC, in Asheville, NC

MMS: It's "This Eucharistic Life"

All: Stay with us.