

Maundy Thursday and Communion Prayer

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I am teaching a divinity school class on worship this semester, and have found myself dusting off some things I haven't thought about in a long time, including the elements of our communion liturgy. We do it nowadays as a matter of course, but it's good every so often – on *this* night, for example – to take a step back and remember, not to be dogmatic, but to be mindful.

It's really only been in the last generation or two that we Protestants and Presbyterians have paid attention to any of this. In earlier times, (you might remember them) communion was often an afterthought to worship, with no real liturgy, as much of a once-a-quarter add-on and nuisance as anything else. No longer, and thank goodness.

First, there is an invitation. Not my invitation, not even the church's invitation. But Christ's invitation to Christ's table. He is the host. We are his guests. Then all sorts of introductory language, centering on what is called the *sursum corda* – “lift up your hearts.”

Think about what *sursum corda* means, what it means for each of us to lift our hearts to God and for us collectively to do the same. If our hearts are heavy, and they have good cause to be so this week, we lift them to God, who will receive them and by so doing carry the burden of our heavy and hungry hearts.

We then get a history lesson – a quick run-through from creation to Old Testament to the point when Jesus came to earth. Our history is placed in the context of God's history. This section of the prayer often ends, as it will tonight, with something called a *sanctus*, where we will sing “holy, holy, holy.” For God's history *is* holy history, the history of creation and salvation into which we are engrafted.

Then the *benedictus qui venit*, “blessed is the one who comes...” Familiar words we shared just a few days ago as we jubilantly waved palms.

Then something called the *anamnesis*, both a remembering *and* an offering. We remember Jesus' life, his ministry with us. We remember what we rehearse this evening – his betrayal and sacrifice, his death. In our tradition, those things do not happen again at this table tonight, but we remember them, and we remember him, his body broken and his blood poured out. Remembering matters. It carries great power.

Then something called the *epiclesis*, where we ask the Holy Spirit to be present with us. That is what we believe, that even though the Holy Spirit confounds us, it is present with us, especially now, at the point when we gather. Without the Spirit, this ritual remains just that. With the Spirit, it is transformed into something deeper.

This is not a worship class, by any means, and communion can be perfectly Presbyterian absent this structure. But it seems somehow helpful to remember that what we do tonight has been done for centuries roughly this way. It has been done in grand cathedrals and little backwater shacks. It has been done with pomp and circumstance and with exceeding humility. It has been done with wine and rich bread, and Kool-Aid and potato chips. It has included popes and princes and the sorriest of all of us. It may have looked and felt different, but almost since the beginning its rhythm has been this rhythm – life’s rhythm. Inviting and lifting. Remembering and receiving. It is done tonight in that rhythm, in that spirit, by the Spirit.

Yet as we remember, we also claim what the White Queen said to Alice: “It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.” Mindful of the past, we also do this looking around and looking ahead. Therefore it is done now knowing that bodies lie broken in Brussels and hearts lie broken in many places around our broken world. It is done as our own nation experiences divisiveness and extremism. It is done as those we love face cancer and depression and memory loss and isolation, and we ourselves struggle with all the things we struggle with, including grief. It is done as the culture pays increasingly less attention that we do this at all, to who we are, and as we fret and fuss over whether we will even have a future.

And it is done on this night in the shadow of a story where the one person who can make a difference is given up for a little spending money, and where our culpability is enmeshed in fatigue and indifference and cowardice.

And yet, now, in the face of all of that, it is still done. And it will be.

It is not so much the liturgical arrangement, though when it is honest and real, it can help. It is that it is done in the simple, profound rhythm of gathering and remembering and breaking and pouring and partaking. And trusting. And hoping.

And loving, as we are loved. Even this night.

Communion Prayer (adapted from the Iona Community)

He was always the guest. In the homes of Peter and Jairus, Martha and Mary, Joanna and Susanna, he was always the guest. At the meal tables of the wealthy where he pled the case of the poor, he was always the guest. Upsetting polite company, befriending isolated people, welcoming the stranger, he was always the guest.

But here, at this table, he is the host. Those who wish to serve him must first be served *by* him, those who want to follow him must first be *fed* by him, those who would wash his feet must first let him make *them* clean. For this is the table where God intends us to be nourished; this is the time when Christ can make us new.

So come, you who hunger and thirst for a deeper faith, for a better life, for a fairer world. Jesus Christ, who has sat at our tables, now invites us to be guests at his.

You are holy, O God of majesty, and it is indeed right to offer our praise. For you made us, and before you made us, you made the world we inhabit, and before the world, you made the eternal home in which, through Christ, we have a place. All that is spectacular, all that is plain, have their origin in you; all that is lovely, all who are loving, point to you as their fulfillment.

And grateful as we are for the world we know and the universe beyond what we could ever know, we particularly praise you, whom eternity cannot contain, for coming to earth and entering time in Jesus. For his life which informs our living, for his compassion which changes out hearts, for his clear speaking which contradicts our harmless generalities, for his disturbing presence, his innocent suffering, his fearless dying, his rising to life breathing forgiveness, we praise and worship you.

Here, too, our gratitude rises for the promise of the Holy Spirit, who even yet, even now, confronts us with your claims and attracts us to your goodness. Therefore we praise you, joining our voices with the celestial choirs and with all the faithful in every time and place who forever sing to the glory of your name...Sanctus and Benedictus...

And now, lest we believe that our praise alone fulfills your purpose, we fall silent and remember him who came because words weren't enough. Setting our wisdom, our will, our words aside, emptying our hearts, and bringing nothing in our hands, we yearn for the healing, the holding, the accepting, the forgiving which Christ alone can offer.

Merciful God, send now, in kindness, your Holy Spirit to settle on this bread and cup. Fill us with the fullness of Jesus. And let that same Spirit rest on us, converting us from the patterns of this passing world, until we conform to the shape of him whose meal we now share.