

# The Stewardship of Bread and Cup

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**John Wilkinson**

**Third Presbyterian Church**

**October 1, 2017**

**Philippians 2:1-13 and Exodus 17:1-7**

We emptied my parents' house some three years ago. In her ongoing quest to declutter, my sister recently gave back to me a box of 45 records. For those of you who don't know what a 45 record is, let alone what a record, it was the way many of us in our youth listened to music. Singles, they were called, and I had dozens of them. Looking through the box was a trip down memory lane, a window into a specific era and my own often questionable taste in music, though there were some gems in there as well.

I didn't listen to country music much then, except the occasional viewing of "Hee-Haw" on a Saturday night – if you don't know what "Hee-Haw" is, well, that would take much too long to explain.

So not much country music, but one or two Johnny Cash singles, "Man in Black" and "Folsom Prison Blues." Whatever else he was, Johnny Cash was cool, with a cool voice. Those records triggered other memories, including the stories of Johnny Cash's various falls from grace, his battles with addiction and his musical revival, late in life. I remember reading about Johnny Cash's relationship with producer Rick Rubin, who is credited with saving Cash's career. Rubin mostly works with rock musicians, but uncovered in Cash a spare sound and style that was not rock and not country and was very compelling, causing me to buy my first and only Cash CD, which had long before replaced the vinyl album.

I read at that time, and re-read the story this week, of how Cash and Rubin, born Jewish but now of no particular religious practice, or perhaps of many, would talk on the phone every night, and share communion. Communion. How interesting, I thought. Then I didn't know what to think. What they were doing wasn't communion, at least in the way I understood it – with a liturgy and a minister and

little cups and trays and oversight, lots of theological “stuff” to make sure things were decent and orderly. Yet what they were doing was certainly communion in some other senses, more particular to them, perhaps, but also more expansive.

Don't worry, in case there are Presbyterian sacrament police in the house. Don't worry. But on this World Communion Sunday, when we welcome Kenyan sisters and brothers to our house and where we are all welcomed at the table, in this year when we think about 190 years of history, in this season when we think about stewardship in expansive ways, then perhaps a moment or two to ponder what this all is and what it means using the unique lens of a formerly Jewish record producer and an aging singer.

First the name, or names. The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, or the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Sacrament means “sacred,” of course, and holy. This is holy, we believe, blessed by God and blessed by God's ongoing presence. Christians have fought over what that presence means or looks like. We Presbyterians, as we often do, have landed somewhere in the middle, believing that somehow the spirit of Christ is with us as we gather. It is a sacrament because Jesus told us to do it – “do this,” he said. So we do.

The “this” in “do this” was a meal. We forget that as it has become so ritualized. People often ask me how children can understand – they can certainly understand that Jesus shared a meal with his friends and told us to do that as well. A supper.

Yet a supper that communes. We commune with Jesus first and foremost, but we also commune with one another. Our understanding of all of this might be individualized – we each experience this in our own way – but it's never privatized, and it's always communal, in community, the body broken within the body gathered. And the body cannot be limited to those near us, and clearly not limited to those like us.

That's what I love about World Communion Sunday. It may be quaint or sentimental, but I love envisioning people all over the world – in various

languages and in many styles and customs – breaking bread and sharing some kind of cup. I think Jesus would like that.

And it's not even limited to that. Communion, as much as we fuss about the liturgical requirements, is nothing if it does not have an ethical component as well. That is to say, we cannot break bread and share the cup this morning if we do not think of those who came to Dining Room Ministry yesterday, or those who will come here for food tomorrow. We cannot break bread and share the cup this morning if we do not think of those who have no food or water in Puerto Rico. We cannot break bread and share the cup this morning if we do not think of those in Kenya who are ministered to and with our Kenyan friends.

Communion must have an ethical component, which reminds us always that this is the Lord's Supper, and not ours. We are guests, and not hosts, and the hospitality we experience here must overflow to all the places where hospitality is so urgently needed.

I like to think of our Third Church forbears marking this sacrament at our first location, in 1827, in our second location, and in this place since the 1880's. For much of Presbyterian history, communion happened four times a year, quarterly, and perhaps also on Maundy Thursday. The argument was that more often would make it less "special," or "meaningful," but I question that logic. That has certainly changed. At any rate, think of all those who have gone before us, who looked different, behaved different, perhaps believed different. Yet at this point—when bread was broken and cup poured – a direct and continuous line connects us from that first meal to so many meals that followed to this one, communion as a great equalizer and an extraordinary common denominator.

The common denominator is Jesus, of course, described this morning by Paul to the Philippians as one who emptied himself for humanity, and, in a surprising and unexpected turnabout, was exalted by God for it. That servanthood of Jesus underscores the ethical demands of this sacrament – if Jesus did this for us, we must do it for others.

But it also reminds us of one more understanding of communion. We Presbyterians have shied away from the term “Eucharist” because it sounded either too Catholic or too Episcopalian. It is neither, or it is both, and so much more. “Eucharist” means “thanksgiving,” and at heart this meal is a true thanksgiving feast. I bet that’s what Rick Rubin and Johnny Cash were doing – saying “thank you” in their own way.

I hope that’s what we will do in a moment or two. Say thank you. Thank you as a continual reminder of God’s provision, provision offered even when we don’t say thank you. The Israelites had been liberated from bondage and were wandering. Their thirst was strong, but still they demanded and complained and forgot all about God’s provision. Moses was fed up with them and complained to God. And God, like so many other times, time and time again, provided water from the rock, in the face of ingratitude.

We are tempted to complain about what we don’t have. And we are tempted to think that what we do have is of our own making. “Eucharist” reminds us otherwise, that we have what we need, more than enough, in abundance, gracious gifts from a generous God.

For that, we say thank you.

For that, we join with those who have gone before us, and say thank you.

For that, we share this meal physically today with Kenyan partners and spiritually in so many other ways every time we gather, with all who follow Jesus all around the world, and say thank you.

For that, we reclaim the ethical mandate of this meal as we think of those in need, whose bodies and spirits hunger and thirst for righteousness, and say thank you.

For these truly are “the gifts of God, for the people of God.” Thanks be to God. Amen.