

A little girl asked her mother, “Mommy, why do you cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?” The girl’s mother told her that she thought it added to the flavor by allowing the meat to better absorb the spices, but perhaps she should ask her grandmother since she always did it that way. So the little girl found her grandmother and asked, “Grandma, why do you and Mommy cut the ends of the meat off before you cook it?” Her grandmother thought a moment and answered, “I think it allows the meat to stay tender because it soaks up the juices better, but why don’t you ask Nana? After all, I learned from her, and she always did it that way.” The little girl was getting a little frustrated, but climbed up in her great-grandmother’s lap and asked, “Nana, why do you cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?” Nana answered, “I had to; my cooking pot wasn’t big enough.”

There are a lot of things that we do in life that we do without asking questions about, without knowing why we do them a certain way. I think as humans we often crave familiarity so habits and traditions form quite easily and sometimes quite unintentionally. This is particularly true in organizations and institutions like the Church. Some people joke that once you have done something twice, it has become a tradition, with ways you should and shouldn’t do it already chiseled in stone. The danger with this, is that we can sometimes forget why we do something, or what significance our actions have. It is occasionally a good idea to explore afresh why and how we do these things.

Over the past couple of weeks we have explored why we worship, and what we do in the first half of our Sunday service known as the liturgy of the Word. Today we turn to the second half of our Sunday Service, Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharistic feast, exploring why it is we do this week and week out and what we believe about it. Let’s be honest, to an outsider that has no Christian knowledge, Holy Communion is a strange beast. We talk about participating in a great feast but we only eat a small wafer and have but a sip of wine. We speak of eating the body and blood of Jesus, words that can sound cannibalistic to the uninitiated. We kneel, we shake hands as a sign of peace, we utter words of confession and absolution, we sing – to someone outside the Church these are all strange acts, perhaps archaic acts of a religious tradition that has lost touch. Without knowledge or understanding of why we do these things, then yes these acts are strange and perplexing. And so today I want to explore what we are doing when we celebrate Communion together and why we do it.

At the heart of the act of celebrating Holy Communion is a celebration of the relationship with the risen Lord Jesus, who on the night that he was betrayed said “Take eat; this is my body which is given for you; Drink this all of you; this is my blood shed for you.” By celebrating communion together we take seriously Jesus’ words and honour them. I remember being shocked to find out during a course in seminary on John Wesley – de facto founder of the Methodist Church – that he insisted that it was the duty of Christians to receive communion as frequently as they were able, and that there was no reason or level of spiritual unworthiness that should hold someone back from receiving communion. His reasoning on both accounts was the celebrating Holy Communion, was an express command that Jesus had made to his disciples, and therefore being obedient to Christ meant celebrating it as frequently as one could. Although there are no requirements or recommendations for Anglicans on how frequently we should celebrate communion, most Anglican churches now celebrate communion on a weekly basis, and so as we celebrate week in and week out, we respond in obedience to our Lord, and we celebrate the relationship we have with Jesus.

While celebrating communion is part of our discipleship and relationship with Jesus – what we are doing it and why we are doing it does not end there. Not only do we obey and follow as we celebrate Holy Communion, but we also rejoice in the presence of Christ, we experience the fruit of repentance and finally can experience true community first hand through the reconciliation that Christ accomplished on the Cross.

I have spoken before about how I believe that joy is the essence of the Christian life, and I think that this element of joy should be most present when we share in the mystery of the Eucharistic feast. As Anglicans there is no specific understanding we have of Holy Communion: some Anglicans believe the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ either literally or spiritually, some Anglicans believe

that in the Eucharist we experience the real presence of Christ in our midst as we share together the bread and wine, still others believe that in the act of celebrating communion we are elevated to the heavenly places into the presence of God, while others believe we remember and honour the words of Christ in memorial. Whatever your theological understanding of the Eucharist, there is reason to rejoice in the holy mystery, there is reason to celebrate as we experience wonders beyond our imagination. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he commends his readers to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus until his coming again, through their celebration of the Eucharist. It is in the very act of breaking bread and lifting the cup that we can proclaim the victory that Christ has accomplished, it is this act that we can rejoice. This is why we sing, and some congregations dance when they come together to worship, we have much to be grateful for and therefore much to rejoice!

While rejoicing and joy are at the heart of the Eucharistic feast, we only come there through the act of repentance and the realization that God's grace and mercy extends even to us, even as we fall into sin. Sin is not something that we like to talk about very much anymore, perhaps it seems too judgemental, or perhaps we have been convinced by media and pop culture that people are inherently good and that we only need to better ourselves not be saved from anything. While this sounds good, and makes us feel better it neglects the fact that much is deeply wrong in the world and only sin can truly explain the depths of evil and depravity which lurks all about us. Our liturgies, particularly the Eucharistic liturgy in the Book of Common Prayer, emphasize our status as sinners, not to demean us, but rather to remind us of the immense gift that God's grace and mercy is in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Each week we are offered the opportunity to confess our sins, to lay them bare before – God yes – but also before ourselves and prepare ourselves for the joyous feast of communion. It is easy to say the words of confession without taking stock of ourselves and the mistakes we have made, it is easy but I challenge us to make these words our own. Let us listen to the words as we speak them together, let us lay before God those times and places where we have fallen short of his glory, and let us hear in the words of absolution the forgiveness that God offers to us, forgiveness that is at the heart of the Eucharistic feast.

As we repent and rejoice in the Eucharistic feast, we also experience the reconciliation of God and are invited to share it together. It is at the Eucharist that we can experience what it means to be part of one body, to be part of one community regardless of who we are and where we come from. Everyone is equal when we share Communion together, no one: not the rich, not the poor, not men, not women, not even the priest is above anyone else as we come to this table to celebrate together. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ, we are all coming to rejoice, to repent and to be fed with good things. In Holy Communion we experience a taste of what it means to be reconciled with God, and as we anticipate that the fullness of that reconciliation we are called to be reconciled to one another. In fact the Bible is quite clear that you should not come to the table if you are not reconciled to a brother and sister in Christ. Our worship provides us the opportunity to make amends, during the peace. While it is beautiful thing to see us share signs of God's peace amongst us as we greet one another and shake each other's hands – the peace is not a social time, but rather it is the time in the service to seek forgiveness from those you have wronged and to forgive those who have wronged you. Has someone offended you? Seek them out, today, and offer them the peace of Christ as a sign you have forgiven them. Have you hurt someone by your words or actions? Seek them out, today, for their forgiveness, showing them you are contrite and seek to be reconciled. Do you bear a grudge against someone for deeds long past and nearly forgotten? Seek them out, today, and share the peace of Christ together as you move beyond old hurts and offenses. It is only when we are reconciled with our brothers and sisters around us here today, that we can truly experience the joy of the Eucharistic feast.

Today as we move to our time to celebrate Holy Communion, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, let us remember that we come in obedience to rejoice, repent and be reconciled. Let us remember why we choose to come here every Sunday, and partake in this seemingly strange, mysterious and wondrous celebration of bread and wine; body and blood. Let us rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ, who bids us come to his table and be filled with good food. Thanks be to God! Amen