

Nathan Brown
 “What the Heck is a Gloria Patri? (Thanksgiving)”
 October 4, 2009
 West Side Christian Church

Mark 14:12-26

Here in America, our family lives present a strange paradox. We often wish that our families would function in an emotionally healthy way and look something like the family on *Leave it to Beaver*. Yet, it’s normal for a family to be dysfunctional and fractured. There’s our ideal of family, and then there’s the reality.

The same is true for our church family. We have an idea that we should always be united in Christ, always be singing “Blest Be the Tie That Binds,” but the truth is that we fight and are mean to one another. We hurt each other’s feelings. We exclude and do not always love with the love of Christ. Sometimes church life is more like an episode of the *Jerry Springer Show* than like an episode of *Leave It to Beaver*.¹

To add another layer of irony to our life as a church family, the ritual that is to symbolize who we are as a people of faith—a people unified by Christ—is the ritual that keeps so many Christians divided. While the table and our service of Communion are supposed to be about reconciliation, forgiveness, and unity, over time the Lord’s Supper has created splinter movements, divisiveness, and a great deal of hurt and pain.

I recall at General Assembly a few years ago, an individual tearfully, but gratefully, giving thanks for the open table that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) offers. He had recently been to a Catholic Mass with his daughter and her husband. His son-in-law was Catholic and his daughter had chosen to convert in order for their new family to be unified. At this Catholic Mass on Christmas Eve, the father was not able to share Communion, was not able to sit at the same table, with his daughter and son-in-law because Protestants are still not acknowledged by the Catholic Church as being “true Christians.”

This morning, we conclude our sermon series on worship by reflecting on the third, and most important part of our worship experience: “Thanksgiving.” And we do so appropriately on this special Sunday we Protestants refer to as “World Communion Sunday.”

The portion of the service of Thanksgiving includes the offering of our gifts to God. In your bulletin this begins with the invitation to Christian Stewardship and continues through the offertory, the prayer of thanksgiving, and singing the Doxology. Additionally, this portion of the service includes the breaking of bread together through the Lord’s Supper. Once again, in your bulletin, this encompasses the communion

¹ Bartholomew, Christine R. “Living By The Word: October 4, 2009.” *The Christian Century*. September 22, 2009. Pg. 21.

meditation, communion hymn, elder prayers, words of institution, and consuming the elements together.

However, if you want to know of my thoughts about why I believe Communion should be at the end of the service, as it is today and will remain for the foreseeable future, read my newsletter article this month. For, this morning, I want to spend our time together focusing on, not the order of the service of Thanksgiving, but more the purpose of our time spent around the table.

I bring up family and this notion of our ideal family versus the reality of our families because I believe this to be intricately related to the purpose of what we do during the service of Thanksgiving. Not only are we called to be the one body of Christ, unified in purpose and meaning, but our oneness and unity are to be grounded in the fact that we are God's children. We are not Christian friends or acquaintances. We are brothers and sisters of our eternal parent in heaven.

Reflecting on ourselves as family gathered at this table changes the dynamic around what happens during the service of Thanksgiving. Friends care about one another. Acquaintances might check on each other. However, there is a different commitment to one another when it comes to family. There is a sense that even in our brokenness, we still love one another. There is something binding in a family that is unlike any other kind of relationship.

This table functions as that adhesive. It is this table that works as that glue. Communion is what binds us to God and to one another in that strange paradox of who God call us to be and the reality of who we are. The Lord's Supper bridges that gap. It does so in a way that it represents the most fundamental part of connectedness and unity, of what it means to be family—and that is forgiveness. The binding agent in Communion has always been forgiveness.

I remember, as a child, sitting at the kitchen table one morning with my family, eating breakfast. The night before, the babysitter had stayed late to look after my brother and me. I noticed after the lights had gone out that Chad had snuck out of bed and was in the game room watching the World Wrestling Federation Championship. I came into the room and he said to me, "You can only stay up and watch this if you promise not to tell mom and dad." I said, "Of course."

However, at the table on that morning, a wave of guilt came over me. It was as if I was confronted with the ideal my parents had of me (that I had behaved the night before with the babysitter) and the reality of what had happened (I had stayed up past my bedtime without the babysitter knowing).

In the midst of that guilt, I blurted out my confession to my parents, "Chad and I stayed up last night and watched the World Wrestling Federation without Mary knowing." My brother looked at me and just rolled his eyes. My mother, however,

looked at me and said, “We appreciate your honesty. Thank you for telling us. You are forgiven.”

“You are forgiven.” Those words are what distinguish the way that Matthew describes this meal versus the way that Mark, Luke, and John describe that first Lord’s Supper. In Matthew’s version, Jesus says, “for this blood is poured out for many, *for the forgiveness of sins*.” “You are forgiven.” Those three words, symbolized by the bread and the cup, are what reconnect us to God and one another—those three simple, yet complex words are what bind us to our family in Christ.

I keep using this word family because not only does it hurt more when it is family that sins against us, but we are also more prone to forgive a family member than we are a complete stranger. I am not saying that it is any easier to forgive family...it is just that our ideals of family are such that we want to forgive one another. Maybe not like the Cleavers on *Leave it to Beaver*, but when it comes to family, forgiveness is what Christians want. Reconciliation is what God always wants.

In Bible study this week, we were discussing the parable of the prodigal son. If you recall that story, Jesus is telling some scribes and Pharisees this parable in response to their questions about the lowlives with whom Jesus associates. Jesus tells them that a father has two sons. The youngest of the sons asks for his inheritance, leaves his family, and journeys off to squander everything he has. The eldest son stays behind and continues to work for his father. When the youngest son reaches his lowest of lows, he decides to return to his father’s household, ask for his father’s forgiveness, and ask to at least work as a servant for his family.

The father’s response is unexpected. He runs out to meet his son, falls to knees, embraces him, and welcomes him back not only in the status as his son, but the father also kills the fatted calf and throws a party for the prodigal son’s return.

In the course of discussing this parable the question came up, “Whom do we represent in this story?” It was obvious that the group wanted to be represented by the father, embracing forgiveness, extending grace without any questions asked. However, we came to the conclusion that we are more like the Pharisees and scribes, scoffing at not only the sinners with whom Jesus associates, but also at the parable itself. Who can offer such forgiveness? Who can extend such grace? Surely we can’t? Therein, again, lies the strange paradox of this table.

For, by instituting the Lord’s Supper, by giving up his life, putting his ministry in our hands, in the body of the church, God obviously thought that we could. God believes in us to bridge that gap between our ideals and our reality. God offers us unthinkable grace and forgiveness so that we might extend the same to others. When we come to this table as God’s family, we come not only to be reconciled to God, but we come to be reconciled to one another. We come to be unified as God’s family once again.

The liturgical refrain of the Eastern Orthodox worship service on the Sunday morning before Lent begins is, “Open to me the gates of repentance.” This is a plea for us to have the courage to be who God calls us to be; to repent and to not only ask for forgiveness, but to live lives of forgiveness.

And then, just to make sure that there is no confusion about what is being asked of them, in the Vespers service for that Sunday evening before Lent begins in Eastern Orthodox churches, every minister and every member of that community lines up and begins a miraculous dance of guilt and grace. One by one, one after the other, everyone in the church literally gathers around the communion table, face to face, hand in hand to say, “I’m sorry for all the ways that I have hurt you, and I am asking for your forgiveness.”

I wonder how we might be different tomorrow if we did that at the Communion table today? How would we as Christians, as the church, be different next week if the gates of repentance were truly opened as we celebrated the Lord’s Supper every Sunday? What difference could West Side Christian Church make in the world if we embodied Christ’s body and blood given for the forgiveness of sins? And what would be the impact of our ministry if we suddenly stopped reflecting the horrid evil of all the unnecessary divisions that are just so common to the human condition, and began to actually live as a family, as true brothers and sisters in Christ?²

On the night when He was betrayed our Lord used the bread and cup to draw tight the connection between His impending death on the cross and the problem of sin, to draw tight the ideal of who God calls us to be and the reality of who we are. And on that cross at Calvary, his body and blood showed us exactly how that connection is drawn tight, how we are ultimately bound together by his body and blood—it is accomplished today by me saying to you, “I’m sorry for all the ways that I have hurt you, I am asking for your forgiveness.” And you responding by saying, “You are forgiven.”

Amen.

² Skinner, Douglas. “Return to Wholeness.” Sermon Preached at 2009 General Assembly in Indianapolis, Indiana.