

## Appetizer of the Way

October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023

Scripture Text: Luke 14:7-24

### Sermon Transcript

#### Appetizer

This sermon is years in the making. Years ago in the previous building, we were getting up to leave from a service with communion. Emily commented to me how she was hungry. And this is a glimpse into the weird way my brain works sometimes. The part of my brain that studied neuroscience kicked in and I wondered out loud if there was a bit of the appetizer effect.

The basic idea of the appetizer effect is that the experience of a little bit of food, especially certain types of food, triggers your brain that it is time to eat, so your body redirects its energy from other functions to prioritize getting ready to digest the food. Then when more food doesn't come quickly enough, you're hungrier than if you hadn't eaten that appetizer, because now your body is trying to digest something that hasn't arrived. And then my neuroscience brain quickly took a back seat and my theology brain jumped in. I started thinking that this is what is happening with communion, *maybe* in a physical sense but definitely in a spiritual sense.

A phrase you'll sometimes hear in theological speak is the idea that the Kingdom of God is now, but not yet. There is some sense in which it is started, but it's not yet complete. So, my own phrasing of that idea today is we can experience an appetizer of the way of Jesus now, especially at the communion table, but it's not the whole meal yet.

I hope this analogy works for somebody else because it has been stuck in my head for several years.

#### Ed's Sermon

At one point I was scheduled to preach this on World Communion Day 2020, before you know, all the plans changed for a couple of years. One of the best things to come out of that delay is that Ed gave a great sermon about communion back in May.

Ed's had a bit more of a deconstructionist lens. If you are starting from a place with a damaging view of communion, where it feels harmful to you, it is often important to dismantle that first before you can start trying to construct something healthier. So, if you need to deconstruct some more first, I won't blame you if you tune me out and go listen to Ed's instead. It's the May 28<sup>th</sup> video, not available publicly but is available through a link in the members-only section of the website, which I find somewhat ironic given the theme of the message.

Ed's starting point was that communion should not be about qualification, whether by baptism or anything else. It's an invitation. It comes with some meaning and responsibility to accept that invitation, some expectation that we will be changed, but everybody is invited. He also gets into some aspects like the symbolisms of bread and wine, which I'm going to avoid repeating, but are also great.

I've heard others use the language that communion is filling, or satisfying, which might seem contradictory to my appetizer analogy. And there's one level that I think that's true, that it should feel substantial on its own, that a meal within a loving community is already powerful. And like the

deconstruction idea, it might depend on your context, too. Maybe today you really need to experience this and let that be enough.

I think this idea that Ed gave, of an invitation into something good, rather than a qualification list, fits very well with my appetizer analogy. If we're doing communion well, we should feel like we are being invited into something good, but it's not just the good of the communion table for its own sake. That's just a taste of the bigger Way of Jesus that everyone is invited into.

### Jesus' Embodied Table

In the book *Searching for Sunday* that a group of us are reading together, author Rachel Held Evans points out that there are a lot of varieties in how we do communion across traditions. But one thing that is pretty consistent is the use of the word "remember." We have it engraved on the front of our table. At the simplest level, the invitation of this ritual is to remember. One of the other names for this ritual is Eucharist, which means the Thanksgiving. It's a remembering, something that we are thankful for.

I took a course on human memory in university. I don't remember most of it.

But I do remember some of how to reinforce memories. Repetition is a huge part of it. The more you do something, the stronger that pathway will be. That's a lot of why we do rituals in general, or set up statues and plaques, or do things like land acknowledgements and wearing orange Every Child Matters shirts. The more we encounter something and associate it with some deeper meaning, the more that meaning becomes reinforced in our brain.

Another big factor in strengthening memory is embodiment. The more cues we are giving our brain, from multiple senses, the more possibilities for our memory pathways to activate.

In *Searching for Sunday*, Rachel quotes from Barbara Brown Taylor:

With all the conceptual truths in the universe at his disposal, Jesus did not give them something to think about together when he was gone. Instead, he gave them concrete things to do – specific ways of being together in their bodies – that would go on teaching them what they needed to know when he was no longer around to teach them himself... 'Do this,' he said – not believe this but do this – 'in remembrance of me.'

It's also worth noting that this is a communal memory. It is not primarily about you individually. It is about us as a community choosing to remember Jesus and shape our communal life around that memory.

We won't remember perfectly because we are not perfect people. But we can get that appetizer taste, that spark of hunger that reminds us that this is a story that we want to be a part of.

### Equitable Expanding Table

If it is in remembrance of Jesus, that means it is Jesus's table, not ours, which may reinforce the idea that it can be a little silly and missing the point for us to draw up qualifications about who gets to eat at Jesus' table.

One of Jesus' parables in the Gospels, the passage from Luke that we read today, is about a man who decided to throw a banquet, then struggled to find people who would accept the invitation. We sang the song in my church growing up that openly mocked those who are too important to accept the invitation.

It's weird as a hymn to be openly mocking people, and even weirder that we sang in the voice of those we were mocking. The chorus would say, "I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now, I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow."

There is some responsibility to joining a party, as the important people who rejected the invitation demonstrate. It costs time, including time away from your new cow, I guess. It might be awkward if you don't know everyone. If you're a narcoleptic introvert like me, it might just be really tiring and you'll need a month to recover. Just like I probably will after speaking a lot today.

The host of the banquet in the parable isn't chasing the respectable important people who have said no, isn't pleading with them or coercing them into something they don't want to do. We see similar in other times in Jesus' ministry, where somebody walks away because they've decided the cost is too great, and Jesus lets him. If one extreme is the fence declaring who is allowed in and who is not, the other extreme would be trying to force everybody to take part whether they want to or not, which is largely the story of Christendom up to and including some Christian nationalist movements today.

I also wonder if part of why many of these important people declined was because they knew this was the kind of host who would invite others that they didn't want to be associated with. The host doesn't stop trying to expand the table, next calling for the poor and disabled to be brought in.

In the context of communion and church in general, there might be a few reasons why we would want to opt out, but if we're doing this church thing right, I think the biggest one is that it will feel like a cost if you are used to being privileged. And we might decide that we don't want to pay that cost.

Right before the parable in this reading, Jesus says to start with inviting the poor and otherwise marginalized. To use a phrase from liberation theology, God has a preferential option for the poor. That's where God starts. The rituals, the systems, the structures, need to be centred around the most marginalized.

Starting with the marginalized ensures that everybody who wants to be a part of it gets to eat. This comes toward the so-called paradox of tolerance, the idea that you must be intolerant of the intolerant or else it isn't safe for those being hurt by the intolerant. It's my least favourite so-called paradox, because I don't think of it quite that way. That relies on still using the fence or qualification language. I want to stick with the invitation language. It isn't simply an invitation to eat and drink, period. It is an invitation into the Way of Jesus. The table of Jesus is a place of safety and openness for all. If you are entering that table in a way that violates that, you're not really joining Jesus' table – you're trying to replace it with a different table more to your liking.

I initially had a longer section here about a text in Corinthians that you might be familiar with, but I had to cut that for time. If you're interested, ask about it in the Adult Ed. But the bottom line is that sometimes to maintain a table that remembers the invitation of Jesus for everybody, we have to point out where we are setting up boundaries. Maybe without even realizing it because they're so built into our culture's way of doing things. Maybe for a reason that made sense in the past but has become counter-productive now.

We won't do this equitable table perfectly, especially when we are starting from a largely privileged position. Again, this is an appetizer. We aim to do it enough that we get hungry for more. That sparks a

positive feedback loop, where another person feels safe here, and they might help us see another way that we could do better.

### Conclusion

So, as we receive the elements today, I hope that it gives us a little taste of a better world. I hope that it gives us more hope, and then when we go back to seeing a broken world and we feel that disconnect, instead of being discouraged, we use that hunger to empower us to help better feed ourselves and others. I hope that it will be our appetizer for the Way.

## Adult Ed / Pieces That Got Cut

### PotLocks/Feasts and Communion

One of the things that got cut but I want to continue with here is to talk about a similar but different tradition. It probably even started as the same ritual and evolved in two different directions. Today we might call it a potluck or a feast. While the communion ritual is usually more somber and reflective, with a small amount of very specific elements, the potluck is a lot more casual and a lot more filling. I talked about the embodied aspect earlier and this goes in that direction even farther. It's chaotic. We don't know exactly what food we'll get. We don't know how many people will come and all the dietary restrictions they might have. It's a lot messier, because bodies are messy and communities are messy.

Both traditions are important, and I think are at their best together.

### Embodied Memory

Along the same lines of the embodied tradition and how that helps memory, I briefly had a bit more in the sermon about the story of the disciples on the Road to Emmaus. In the Gospel of Luke, a couple of disciples were walking on the road to Emmaus when a stranger joins them. The stranger talks about how everything that has happened is a fulfillment of Scripture. They don't recognize him until they share a meal together, when they realize it is the resurrected Jesus. There's something about a meal that makes it easier to see Jesus, compared to any number of hours spent analyzing Bible stories or reading systematic theologies or wrestling with apologetics – all things that can be good in their place.

There are many ways that Christianity, especially in the modern Western world, has become disembodied. We often boil down Christianity to something more abstract about what we believe. In a lot of churches including this one, we mostly show up, sit still, listen, and think. The one embodied thing we do consistently is sing. Other traditions may do a bit more in terms of movement like Pentecostals or in terms of engaging other senses like Orthodox churches using smell. But when we receive communion, we need to slow down a little, stop overthinking everything, and take a bit of wine or juice and a bit of bread, and take care of our bodies together.

There are at least a couple dimensions that can add some tensions to this as we consider our own worship service. We may say we want to be more embodied, but there are other considerations, too.

One is considering those who are joining us online. That's always going to be a mediated experience to some degree. We'll do everything we can to reduce friction, but it won't be quite the same. So there's some tension there. For example, maybe we wanted to more regularly do the passing of the peace where we stand up, walk around, maybe shake hands or hug, and wish the peace of Christ for each other. I really like that tradition. I had a seminary professor who had this incredible pastoral sense with that one, the way that he shook our hand where he would then put his left hand on top, holding us in place for a second, while looking us straight in the eye and saying the peace of Christ. We could do that, and it might be really meaningful for a lot of people on location, but it also might be tougher for those online since it would draw more attention to the thing they aren't a part of, at least not in the same way.

Similarly is factoring in disabilities. Some ways of making worship more embodied might help some disabled groups. We are so much based on what we hear that other practices might make it a lot easier

for deaf people. But that could create problems for others, like if we want people to move more than what are we doing for those who can't move easily?

### Active Liberation

Another idea I tried to get across was actively tearing down barriers, not just accepting people who do manage to get over the barriers.

I had a bit in there at one point about the hymn, Draw the Circle Wide. We might even have it in our hymn book. This church I went to in Kingston loved that song, so much that it was getting kind of annoying. It's not my favourite style of music, but what I really appreciate about it thinking back on it is how active and persistent it is in its words. Draw the circle wide, draw it wider still. It is not simply calling us to allow more people into the circle, if they're first able to get through whatever barriers are in the way. It is an intentional drawing the circle wider, making sure that more and more are welcome. It is tearing down those barriers.

A lot of people aren't going to bother telling you about a barrier they encountered, at least not until you've already established some trust with them. Most will simply never come back. So we do have to be somewhat proactive about looking for that feedback and for trying to predict it using as much empathy as we can. For example, if I'm up there talking about the importance of inviting everybody to the table, and then we don't have a plan for how you can get to the table in a wheelchair or with a cane, or how we're going to coordinate timing with those online so that we can all eat together, it might just feel hypocritical.

What barriers do we have up that might be stopping people from getting to our church, or to the table? I know this is a hard question for a lot of people because we always want to assume that we are already perfectly inclusive, but I do think we sometimes need to slow down and try to imagine what barriers might exist for others we aren't noticing ourselves.

### Confession and 1 Corinthians 11

I initially had a second reading, from 1 Corinthians 11:20-33.

There's that one verse in there that you may have heard out of context, that you should not receive the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner. That verse sometimes gets used to set up the qualifications, to keep out those people who have done that wrong thing. If you start at verse 23 or 27, in a Western individualistic culture, it makes a lot of sense to read it that way.

It ties into the confession idea. One of the things I've heard most about a lot of Mennonite traditions is encouraging everyone to reflect on their relationship with God and if there's anything wrong, make it right before communion. Which I think is often tied to this text.

Being encouraged to reflect and repent individually is important. But I don't really like it being tied to communion. For one because it has that potential to be interpreted as another fence, that I'm not allowed to receive the elements if I'm not perfect. For another, it kind of muddies a big dose of individualism into a communal ritual.

But if you zoom out a little to include starting at verse 20 and ending at verse 33, you can see some very specific context. The specific problem, the way in which it was being done in an unworthy manner, was that the rich were showing up, eating all the food, and getting drunk on all the wine before everyone

else who had to work all day could get there. It is always funny to me to imagine getting drunk off the little, tiny cups that we use. Obviously, they did things a bit differently then. But what wasn't funny is that it was amplifying existing inequities in their society, making the ritual something purely for the rich and reinforcing that everybody else is less than.

There's even a bit in that text about how people are sick and dying because communion isn't being done right. Without the context, it sounds like God is killing people for daring to take it as unworthy individuals. But once I started at verse 20 or earlier, I couldn't help but wonder if it means that the ones who are getting sick and dying are the poor, because they aren't getting any food. Some of the judgement language makes it sound like the rich are being judged and we'd assume they were then the ones getting sick, but that is an individualistic reading. It is consistent with a more Hebrew mindset that the whole community is judged together, so it might still make sense that he was saying the judgement was that the community was suffering because the community was doing things in a way that amplified social inequities instead of solving them.

I did notice the confession prayer today was very communal, a lot of "we" language rather than I language, so even though I don't really like tying it to communion, I did like that.

### World Communion – A Unifying Tradition

I cut my final big section that dealt with the "world" part of "World Communion Sunday." Jenny did an excellent job of covering this theme in the Children's Time, so it worked out well. But here are some of my original thoughts.

Two of the most powerful communion experiences in my life were both when expanding outside my denominational tradition. When I was 16, I was a part of a team that went to Venezuela. Near the end of the week, we had communion together: our Venezuelan hosts, about a dozen Canadian Anglicans, and about a dozen Canadian Uniteds. And we did it in a way I've never encountered elsewhere: we stood up in pairs, hugged, and then served the elements to our partner. After a week of working closely and experiencing the world together, it was deeply intimate in its small scale.

A few years later, I experienced the opposite end of the size scale. I was at a university student conference in St. Louis. On the last night, New Years Eve, about 20,000 of us took communion together. We came from all over the world and all Christian traditions. But in that time together, we were reminded that we were all part of this same movement, all remembering Jesus together. This one wasn't intimate. It was overwhelming in the scale of realizing how big of a thing we were all a part of, how expansive God's love can be.

I've done this ritual with the United Church, with Anglicans, with Baptists, with Pentecostals, with Anabaptists, at nondenominational conferences and in unaffiliated small groups. I've done it with the little cups getting passed through the seats, with people lining up to pick up the elements at the front as we usually do here, with intinction aka rip and dip where we dip the bread into the shared cup, and drinking from the common cup with the priest wiping it in between. And no matter how many variations there are and theologies trying to explain it, it always feels to me like I am part of something so much bigger than myself, than Rockway, than Mennonites.

### Practical Questions

Some of the little practical questions that came up as Thomas and I discussed over the past few weeks:

The grapes: I like this idea personally. It gives a bit of a halfway option if you're not quite comfortable with receiving the traditional elements, but it's still a way to be welcomed and included. I compare it to a time I went to a Catholic church and I went up and crossed my arm to receive the blessing instead of the elements. I didn't want to disrespect what the elements meant to them, knowing I am not Catholic, but I came away feeling good that there was still an option to be included. So to me, that's what the grapes are: a halfway option. Not a fence for who isn't allowed to take the elements, but an option acknowledging that some people are going to be in the middle.

How often do you think we should do communion? Potlucks? Acknowledging that there are more practical needs to make it work, I personally think both should be more like once a month.

How do we best convey that it is a communal memory? One that came up with Thomas was having him pour the cup and break some bread in front of us, rather than only pointing at the individual serving sizes that everybody would eat from. I think I've seen it done both ways here at Rockway, and I like seeing the breaking and pouring, as it underlines the more communal experience. Of course, even more communal is sharing the common cup and common loaf that we have to rip from, as in some traditions, but that also is somewhat less practical needing more time per person.

#### Liminality, Sacraments, and Ordinances

I had a seminary classmate who was on more of a research track than pastoral and he loved talking about liminal spaces and liminal rituals. A more mystical phrase for it might be a thin place.

Anabaptists traditionally call communion an ordinance. Our tradition doesn't have sacrament. A sacrament is that thin place or liminal idea, something special about it that makes it easier to connect with God. An ordinance just means that we do it because Jesus told us to, which I find a little underwhelming. I tend more toward the Reformed, maybe even leaning toward Lutheran understanding, where there is something special about this, if not necessarily because God is doing something different than at least because there is value in the communal repetition. Which ties into what I was saying earlier about memory.

I also had a Mastodon conversation recently about this that spun into the question of who is the active participant in this ritual. Are we primarily talking about what God does, or what we do? I've mostly talked about what we do, and that is consistent with Anabaptist tradition. Traditions that are more sacramental would tend toward the other direction, emphasizing that this is about God's grace to us much more than it is about anything we do.

#### Bad Joke

I referenced that the paradox of tolerance was my least favourite paradox. My favourite paradox is the Rick Astley paradox. It is impossible to ask Rick Astley to give you his favourite Pixar movie, because he is never going to give you Up, but in the process, he has let you down. That joke might be too much aimed at Extremely Online Millennials to make sense for this congregation.