

Bread of Heaven

John 6:48-58

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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February 8, 2026/Fifth Sunday After Epiphany

Today marks the fourth Sunday of our 2026 Faith Questions sermon series, the series where your questions set the preaching agenda from the time between Epiphany and Lent.

Today's question is a simple one in terms of how it is expressed. But it is plumbing some of the deepest depths of the Christian faith: What's going on in communion?

Well, perhaps the first thing to say—and I suspect this is obvious—is that it depends on who you ask.

Today's question has been a source of major conflict in the church over the years. If you were to ask this question to, for example, a traditional Roman Catholic and a nondenominational evangelical, you'd get very different answers.

You'd also get different answers depending on *when* you asked the question. Christians in a first century house church, a medieval cathedral, or a twenty-first century Mennonite congregation would each have very different responses.

Amazingly, we have taken something that Jesus did *for us* —and turned our understanding of it into something to fight over. To interpret this charitably, we could at the very least say that all Christians think that the Lord's Supper is important. It matters (or has mattered) enough to fight over it.

So, what are we *actually* doing or saying or symbolizing or proclaiming to each other and to the world when we come together and eat a bit of bread and drink a bit of grape juice?

What might a newcomer with no exposure to the Christian faith make of the scene of a bunch of people coming together, singing some songs, giving some money, listening to some teaching and then.... going and getting a little snack to bring back to their seats?

Do we appreciate the strangeness of this ritual? Or is it just something we've always done and keep doing because we suppose that it must be important even if we couldn't say how or why?

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I want to start by asking us to consider a threefold distinction that I hope might be helpful. In this, and in much of what follows, I am indebted to Gordon Smith's excellent book on the Lord's Supper called *A Holy Meal*.

Smith was (and is) a lecturer at Regent College in Vancouver, and I took several of his classes during my time there. More recently, he was president of Ambrose University just up the road in Calgary from 2012-24. He is now serving as Executive Director for Christian Higher Education Canada.

In his introduction to the book, Smith asks us to consider the differences between a sign, a photograph, and a symbol.

Sign (traffic light). We know what this sign means, right? Green means go; red means stop. Our understanding of these signs is very important.

But there is no inherent connection between the colours and the actions they point to. The link between the sign and that which is signified is arbitrary. We could easily imagine a different world where red meant "go" and green meant "stop." We've just collectively agreed upon this meaning for everyone's safety.

Photograph. A photo is different than a sign. When we look at a photo, the connection with the thing itself and what it represents is not arbitrary. The link is intrinsic.

When I look at this photo, for example, it brings to mind a whole host of experiences and sights and sounds from my time walking the Camino last spring. I am able to put myself back in those experiences, to "enter into them" in some way.

When I look at the photo, I say, "that's me." It's not literally me, of course. But the link between the photo and what is represented is intrinsic, not arbitrary.

Symbol. According to Smith, a symbol is different from both a sign and a photograph.

This symbol, for example, is neither a sign (where the connection between the thing and what it points to is arbitrary) nor a photo (where the connection is intrinsic). It's somewhere in between.

The five rings symbolize unity, different parts of the world coming together in competition, etc. The colours are meant to symbolize different parts of the world being connected by sport.

It may call to mind past triumphs, for example Sidney Crosby's golden goal from 2010 in Vancouver. It may also symbolize political corruption and economic exploitation, but I'll leave that aside ☺.

According to Smith:

What makes a symbol unique and special is that while it points to another reality, as does a sign, it also allows us to participate in that reality, much as with a photograph.¹

The Lord's Supper is a symbol. It is not like a sign, where the connection between a piece of bread and a bit of juice and Jesus are completely arbitrary. Jesus used these specific symbols to communicate something deep and important about what he was about to do for the salvation of the world.

But it's also not like a photograph where the elements are the exact representation of that which is pointed to.

In the simplest terms possible (and with the acknowledgment that all metaphors are partial and incomplete), most Christian disagreement about what's going on in communion can be plotted on a continuum between communion as *kind of* like a photograph and communion as a kind of symbol.

The Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (which only showed up in its present form around the 12th century) would go even beyond the photograph metaphor and say that the bread and the wine are not just exact representations of the body and blood of Christ, they *are* the body and blood of Christ. Literally. The elements are miraculously transformed, and Christ is literally present in the Eucharist.

¹ Gordon Smith, *A Holy Meal: The Lord's Supper in the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 23.

On the other end of the spectrum would be Christians (and there aren't many) who believe that there is no inherent connection between bread and wine and what they point to. It might as well be drinking a bit of coke and having a cookie at summer camp (I have heard of this).

Most are somewhere in between, in the "symbol" camp. Anabaptists would locate ourselves here.

At various points in Christian history, some Christians have been critical of other Christians who see communion as "just" a symbol. In their view, the word "symbol" kind of downgrades the importance of what they think is going on when we come to the table.

But symbols are important. Symbols can take us further than language can.

We can use words to speak about the loss of a loved one, for example. But often it is the symbol of placing flowers on a casket or spreading ashes over a significant place in a person's life that communicate even deeper.

But let's try to use at least a few words.

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Gordon Smith proposes seven words to guide us as we come to the table. Seven words to describe what we're doing and why we're doing it.

Remembrance. We remember what Jesus did on Calvary's cross. We remember what Jesus said about what he did, how he interpreted his own actions, how he willingly went the way of the cross, gave himself away *for us*, for the forgiveness of sins.

Communion. Here, I'll simply quote Smith:

In the Lord's Supper, we are not merely eating; we are eating *together*. There is a companionship with Christ, surely, but it is a communal event. We are in fellowship with one another... When we eat together... we simultaneously affirm our shared identity and cultivate our unity.²

² Smith, 47.

The Lord's Supper is not just a "me and Jesus" moment. It is something that binds us together as a community.

Forgiveness. In Matthew 26, at the Last Supper, Jesus says of the cup, "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins."

We always come to the table as sinners in need of grace. This was as true for those gathered with Jesus when he instituted this practice as it is for us today. The Lord's Supper proclaims what God does with and for sinners. He gives himself for them in mercy, for the forgiveness of sins.

Covenant. This is in many ways the flip side of the welcome of sinners that I just talked about. Jesus eats with sinners and welcomes them at his table. But he is always also summoning us beyond our sin.

The Lord's Supper is also a renewal of our baptismal covenant, where we symbolically died and were raised to new life with Christ and welcomed into his kingdom.

Is this to say that only baptized people can take communion? Historically, many Christians have said yes, including Mennonites.

You will have noticed that this is not our practice here at LMC. We practice an open table, not because we think baptism doesn't matter or that this covenant renewal aspect of the Lord's Supper isn't important, but because (I hope) Jesus' welcome of sinners is the bedrock of our faith. In a sense, if we are going to err *either* in the direction of having the table too open or too closed, we have chosen to go with the former.

Again, this is not to downplay baptism in any way. If you are not baptized and are curious about it, please talk to me 😊

Nourishment. The Lord's Supper is spiritual food. The Book of Common Prayer puts this beautifully in its liturgies around Holy Communion:

The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was given for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life: Take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for thee, and feed on him in thy heart by faith with thanksgiving.

It is interesting that Jesus described himself as bread. As food. As what we need to live. We see this clearly in our text from John where Jesus describes himself as the bread of heaven.

Jesus says, “Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life which I will give you” (John 6:27).

The Lord’s Supper feeds our souls. It nourishes us in grace and mercy and strengthens us to go forth and extend these gifts to the world.

Anticipation. The Lord’s Supper is also a declaration of hope. “We proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again,” as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:26.

At the table we not only look backward in gratitude but forward in anticipation and hope to another meal, the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19).

Eucharist. The word “eucharist” arises from the Greek word for thanksgiving and blessing. This is where the language of “the gifts of God for the people of God” is anchored. Again, Smith puts it well:

While it is surely appropriate to come to the table through confession and sober reflection, this is at most preliminary and “in passing” as we get to the heart of the matter, which is a joyful celebration of the goodness of God. The primary emotional contour of this event should not be grave deliberation but joyous thanksgiving.³

This might be one of the most significant correctives that I have experienced in my lifetime in how I have approached the Lord’s Supper, both as a participant and as a leader.

I often imagined that the Lord’s Supper ought to be a dour, somber affair where we meditated on the agony of Christ’s suffering and resolved to go out and do better for Jesus. There wasn’t much joy.

But there should be.

So, seven words. Seven means through which Christ is *present* among us when we gather at the table.

³ Smith, 106.

We're not going to be celebrating communion today, but we will be twice in the next few months, once on the Sunday of the MCA Delegate sessions that we're hosting (March 15) and once on Maundy Thursday during Holy Week.

I hope that we can remember these seven words when we come to the table.

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So, that's some of what's going on in communion. There's a lot more that could be said, obviously.

To these seven important words I want to add one more. This is not a word that comes out of Scripture, it's not a theological term in any way, but it's one that I think is vitally important for our cultural moment.

The word is "friction."

Over the last few years, I've been thinking a lot about AI and how it is shaping us as human beings (particularly the young, who are accessing it in formative stages of their lives).

One thing that AI (and digital culture more generally) has conditioned many to expect is a kind of frictionless" existence.

The age of the Internet has already trained us to expect everything instantly and easily, from our shopping to entertainment options to access to any information we could imagine.

Now, in our culture of loneliness and disconnection, people are increasingly choosing to interact with chatbots because it's easier than the friction of dealing with real human beings.

A chatbot will always compliment you, never annoy you, always be eager to give you results that adjust to your desires and expectations. Every question is a "great question." You don't have to worry about awkward silences or misinterpreting nonverbal cues. The chatbot will always adjust itself to you, your preferences, your desires, your expectations, your demands.

(If you want to hear more about AI and faith, Jen is going to be leading a workshop at the MCA Delegate Sessions. I think her working title is “Can I ask ChatGPT to pray for me? 😊)

What does this have to do with the Lord’s Supper? I think one crucial thing that’s going on in communion is a bit of friction.

We see plenty of friction in our passage from John 6. Jesus talks about how he is the bread of life, and that only those who feed on him will have eternal life.

In the passage before our reading began today, we see Jesus miraculously feeding the five thousand.

If we were to read beyond where we left off this morning, we’d see the people start to squirm. It was pretty cool when Jesus made actual bread for hungry people on a hillside, but what’s this about?

Who is this guy? What on earth is he going on about talking about his flesh being bread?

And then Jesus gets downright offensive, talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood and how if we don’t do this, we have no life in us.

At this, even the disciples start to back away. Is this some kind of ghastly cannibalism? Who can accept such difficult teaching? Many walked away from Jesus precisely at this point (John 6:66).

Full stomachs? Awesome. All this weird stuff about eating and drinking Jesus’ body and blood and eternal life? Pass.

But Jesus is of course speaking metaphorically about the cross, where he will offer his body and blood for the forgiveness of sin and the salvation of the world.

The true bread of life is the crucified and risen Christ.

This *was* and *remains* an offence to reasonable, rational people looking for reasonable, rational religion. It is “foolishness,” according to the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 1:18).

The Lord’s Supper reminds us of some uncomfortable realities.

At Christmas we sing, “Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king.” Well, the table reminds us how earth received her king. We crucified him.

There is blood and pain and grief and shock and horror at the centre of the Christian faith. Yes, it’s all bound up with joy and nourishment and celebration and anticipation and all the beautiful things we’ve discussed because of the empty tomb that we know followed it.

But there can be no illusions at the table. We cannot look away from our sin or from the beauty of the depths to which love would go to address it.

Christian worship should never, ever be just a bit of inspirational self-help or motivation or therapy, even if elements of these might show up here or there.

There should always be friction. Because when the truth is told, there is friction.

But not enough friction to walk away. When everyone else walks away from Jesus’ hard teaching, Jesus turns to the twelve and asks them, “Will you go, too?”

I can imagine Jesus asking this question with sadness in his voice, possibly even a tear in his eye. “Are you going to abandon me, too?”

Peter’s response has echoed down through the ages: “To whom else shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life.”

May this be our response to the Bread of Heaven, too.

Amen.

