



# First United Church of Oak Park

Preparation, Death, Remembrance...  
Exodus 12:1-28; Mark 14:1-12  
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It's World Communion Sunday and in preparing for this sermon I found myself on a sort of quest for communion knowledge. In our staff meeting we wondered about how World Communion Sunday began, when did it first happen? Who instituted it and why?

These questions led me to write the weekly evotional this week. Then I started thinking about how celebrating communion is a regular practice in the Christian tradition, and every time we celebrate it, we hear the story of when it first happened. It is one of the stories that we are most familiar with.

Then I was trying to remember the first time I took communion. Do you remember the first time you took communion? If you were raised like me or in a church like mine, it probably wasn't a very memorable experience; definitely not one of pomp and circumstance to mark the occasion as a rite of passage. I recall being about 8 or 9 years old and for some reason, that Sunday my mom finally let me participate in . . . snack time during church. When I asked her about it this week, she couldn't recall exactly when I took communion for the first time or why I was deemed ready. She wasn't even sure how she would have explained to me what communion was. She did remember my asking at one point why we had grape juice at church and the Catholic church had wine.

Communion is a sacramental ritual that we practice in the Christian church; some do it quarterly; others like here at First United do it monthly; others weekly; and others daily, depending on your denomination. The thing about rituals is that they become muscle memory, something routine that we do without needing to think about it or ask questions about it. Rituals can be comforting; their consistency and continuity in an ever-changing world can be peaceful and reassuring. But they risk losing their meaning if we are simply going through the motions. The best way that I know how to make something meaningful to me is to learn more about it, ask questions, make connections, and talk about it. So that is what we are going to do with our ritual of communion, in the hope of finding renewed meaning today.

We know that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper the night before he was to be killed and during the Passover celebration, but is there more to the story?

The story of the institution of the Lord's Supper that we are given in the gospels actually parallels the institution of the Passover or the Festival of Unleavened Bread in the Hebrew bible, in the book of Exodus. Often, we forget that Jesus was Jewish, a man well-versed and steeped in the Jewish faith, tradition, and culture. Jesus was called Rabbi, teacher in Hebrew, by many of his followers because he was considered a leader in the community.

The event that became one of the founding rituals in the Christian religion, the Lord's supper or the Eucharist, not only coincided with a Jewish ritual celebration, but was in fact based on it. The Passover commemorates the deliverance of the Israelites from over two centuries of bondage in Egypt. The Torah calls the Passover *hag hamatzot*, which is "the festival of unleavened bread." The festival of Passover is celebrated with the

ritual act of offering a lamb or goat and the eating of unleavened bread. In the scripture, there are very specific instructions for this festival and these elements of lamb, blood and bread. The lamb or goat that was sacrificed was to be consumed and its blood would be painted on the door frame as a sign; a sign of God's promise that God's people would be saved.

Bread and blood, two symbols that precede and commemorate a significant event, a salvific event in fact. Passover, Eucharist. Is anyone else drawing the same parallels here that I am? Let's break it down . . .

In Exodus: the evening before God was to kill every first born in Egypt, the Israelites gathered to eat a meal of lamb, unleavened bread and herbs, and used the lamb's blood as the sign of God's promise to save them. In the Gospels: the evening before God was to kill Jesus, arguably God's first born, the disciples were gathered to eat a meal of lamb, unleavened bread, and herbs, and Jesus calls the broken bread his body, calls the cup his blood, the sign of God's new promise to save them.

The next day the first borns are dead; Jesus suffers and dies.

There are so many parallels: the meal of preparation, the bread, the blood, the deadly event, God's promise, the commands to remember, and to commemorate the event . . .

Jesus institutes this new ritual in tandem with the Jewish celebration of the Passover. I don't believe this is a coincidence. Jesus is an intelligent and clever guy. I have no doubt that he knew exactly what he was doing that night, in that upper room, celebrating The Passover with his disciples.

I try to imagine being one of the disciples at the table that night. It's Passover, a regular event in their lives. Religious, but also cultural; people gather every year for this festival. They do the same things every year, eat the same meal, pray the same prayers. It reminds me of how we celebrate Christmas on my husband's side. It doesn't seem to matter where we gather as long as there is spaghetti, meatballs, lasagna, garbanzo beans, artichokes, Italian beef, and sausage (they're Italian). Then toward the end of the evening, when everyone has had a little too much to drink or it's late enough that the extra helpings have made you groggy and the food coma is setting in, someone undoubtedly says something strange or funny or just completely off topic and out of the blue. In this case, Jesus stands up takes some bread, breaks it, says, "this is my body." Then takes a cup says, "this is my blood" and gives it to them to eat and drink.

Jesus has told the disciples many things throughout his ministry that have confused them, but I imagine this one takes the cake. It's morbid, confusing, and not in line with how they are supposed to celebrate Passover. But Jesus, knowingly and intentionally, used the two symbolic elements of the Passover to send a message about his impending death and to begin a new ritual with his disciples.

God commanded in Exodus of the Passover: "this shall be a day of remembrance for you, you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord, throughout your generations you shall observe it..." Similarly, Jesus commanded in Luke of the Eucharist: "do this in remembrance of me." Throughout the coming generations, Christians would celebrate the Passover as something more. They would celebrate it as the Lord's Supper.

These rituals of sacrificing a lamb, of painting blood as a sign, of preparing unleavened bread, of sharing a simple meal of unleavened bread and a cup are all done in the hope of the promise that God will save, that God will deliver, that God will not allow God's people to suffer any longer. But who are God's people?

The Passover celebrates the liberation and salvation of the Israelite people, in the Hebrew bible these are the people of God. But the Eucharist celebrates the liberation and salvation of all people, because Jesus came with a message of love for all people: that every human being is a child of God.

Jesus sat at that table with one who would betray him, one who would deny him, and many who would desert him. He knew this, and yet he not only shared a meal with them, but loved each of them to the point that he would shed blood for them, die for them. There is no one Jesus would not have welcomed at that table, no one he would have turned away.

Jesus took the most basic, everyday things and turned them into the extraordinary: a table, a cup, some bread, these are symbols that together we use to celebrate the sacrament of Communion. They are visible signs of God's invisible grace, but in my search for renewed meaning I have found that they are also reminders to us that our family tree is rooted deeply in the Jewish faith and that this table was not meant just for us.

It's World Communion Sunday and there are congregations all over the world gathered around a table like this one. In that, we are meant to find unity as a Christian people. But Jesus sought to create unity among all people. He established this ritual event, an event that all are invited to attend. We as a church remember this together every month, but I encourage you to look, to see – wherever bread is broken, wherever a meal is shared, wherever a community is gathered, wherever a cup is poured, a table is set, in the everyday ordinary moments and things – remember and know. God is there and promises salvation for all.