

During the pandemic, or if we ever find ourselves struggling financially, one thing people do to save money is they cut back on eating out. And the restaurant industry has noticed. Some eateries have lowered their prices, some have offered more coupons, and still others have revamped their menus and redecorated their establishments to emphasize a more casual feel. Some have even increased advertising to lure diners to come in more often.

Of course, we all make our own decisions about how often we eat out, but one meal we should eat out whenever possible is communion. And by “eating out” I mean that we should get out, head to church, and share communion with the people of God. Or I could also say, “One meal we definitely should eat *in*, is communion.” That is, communion is sort of a family affair, a family meal. Take your pick: Eat in, or eat out. Similar to the caveat that we shouldn’t ever skip breakfast the most important meal of the day, I might add that the one meal we shouldn’t miss out on is communion.

Admittedly, the Lord’s Supper provides us with a different kind of nourishment than what we receive from a meal at a restaurant, but its nature is similarly communal. Whether we are eating food at a favorite local place or receiving Holy Communion in a Sanctuary, we often do so with other people. You might even say that the Apostle Paul touches on this idea in our second lesson this evening, when he provides us with a brief summary about Jesus instituting the Lord’s Supper.

I think it is important for us to realize that if we read today’s passage in isolation, our outside of the larger context, we are given the impression, or we may come to the conclusion, that Jesus instituted Communion strictly because he knew his followers were going to need some sort of material ritual to keep the memory of his sacrifice alive. It, of course, has that effect, but to get only that out of it, is to

miss that Jesus *needed* the fellowship of communion **himself**, that night of all nights, because of the horror he was to face within just a few short hours.

In that sense, sharing the Lord's Supper on Maundy Thursday is a little different from the other times we partake of it together throughout the year. Most of the time, we rightly think of it in terms of what we receive from it....but on the night before Jesus' crucifixion, we can also think of it in terms of what Jesus received from the meal with his disciples, and what we receive from the meal with others who believe.

Paul gets at this by confronting the unholy ways some members of the Corinthian church were behaving during the communion meals that the congregation shared together. And that part of the story is told in the next section of his letter in verses 17-34. To help us understand the situation they were dealing with, we need to know that when the Lord's Supper was celebrated in the first-century church, it was done somewhat differently from how we usually do it today.

In the early church, the Lord's Supper was observed as part of an actual meal that believers ate together. They ate to satisfy normal hunger, but at some point in the meal, they shared some bread and wine, probably along with a prayer, to make the symbolic connection to Jesus' last meal. In fact, we can come to the conclusion from reading beyond our narrative that the meal itself was something like a potluck dinner, with each family bringing some food.

We learn from reading more of the story that some Christians in Corinth were better off financially than others, and thus they had the resources to bring better food to the meal. Less-well-off people brought what they could, but it was more common fare. This led to a problem because instead of everybody sharing what they had brought, those who brought the better food wanted to eat that food themselves without sharing it. Paul points out the problem: "For when the time

comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.”

In other words, Corinthian Christians, you’re missing the whole point of the Lord’s Supper. It isn’t to promote a “look out for yourself” attitude, but rather its purpose is to unite you to become the body of Christ. You have your own homes for your private meals, but when you come together; don’t dive in to get the best cuts for yourself. Instead, share with one another and be a community of Christ. Paul summed this up by saying, “So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together” — that is, when you eat out,— “it will not be for your condemnation.”

The Christian experience was never meant to be a solitary one; with each person content to work on just his or her own spiritual relationship apart from others. The writer of Hebrews said, “And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Years ago, there was a penal colony located on an island off the southeast tip of Australia. The prison closed long ago, but the prison chapel still stands. Inside, it consists of many little cubicles in which convicts were secured singly during worship services. The separate cubicles prevented inmates from seeing or communicating with one another. The chaplain who conducted the services there would have seen not a congregation, but rather 50 or more individual faces peering at him from the cubicles. Perhaps this was a useful way of controlling violent offenders, but in the biblical sense, this was no church at all, for there was no possibility of community.

A man named Brian Greet, a Christian from Britain, tells of something he saw when traveling in India that helped him understand better the idea of the true church. He was visiting a Christian community where people were suffering from leprosy. When it came time for lunch, he headed for the central dining room. On the way, he heard the sound of laughter behind him. Turning around, he saw two young men, one riding on the other's back. Pretending to be horse and rider, they were thoroughly enjoying themselves. Then Greet noticed that the man who was carrying his friend was blind, and the man he was carrying was lame. The man without eyes used his feet; the man without feet used his eyes. Together they fetched their food and shared it.

That's the idea of the church. The church isn't supposed to be about solitary Christians in their own little cubicles; it's about a fellowship of followers of Jesus Christ. Communion, the common meal of the church, reminds us of the importance to our own spiritual experience of the community's experience of faith. In that sense, what we do when we come to communion in church is we "eat out." We get spiritual sustenance in the company of others.

The late Author Nancy Mairs wrote about what communion came to mean to her when she came to her church during a serious illness without having experienced conversion. "The model I experienced at that church was one of inclusion rather than exclusion. Instead of being denied communion unless I converted, I was given communion until I felt strong enough to convert. The nourishing quality of the Eucharist, freely offered to anyone who's famished, has always been a central metaphor for me. I don't partake because I'm a good **Christian**, holy and pious and sleek. I partake because I am a bad **Christian** riddled by doubt and anxiety and anger: fainting from severe hypoglycemia of the soul. I need food. I need Jesus."

Notice how Mairs talks about the nourishing quality of receiving communion as part of a community. “I was given communion until I felt strong enough to convert.” Of course, it’s always important for us to feed our spiritual lives at home, through private prayers, personal Bible readings, meditation on God’s call and God’s plan for our lives and so forth. That’s eating at home. But when it comes to the life of faith, we also need to dine out, we need to be in the company of other Christians, for what we receive gathered together cannot be duplicated at home.

That’s especially true on Maundy Thursday, when we seek to put ourselves into the somber mood of Jesus’ last meal. He, like us, needed the fellowship of other Christians to strengthen him for what he was going to have to face alone. We, like him, need both what our heavenly Father gives us at the communion table, and what our fellow believers give us, by sharing our Lord’s final supper together. That is something we experience tonight as we offer up our prayers for the world and all people who are in need during the prayers of intercession, and as we come forward to the altar to receive the body and the blood of Jesus, who on this night gave us a final communal command to love one another as he has loved us. Thanks to God. Amen.