

February 25 is National Pancake Day, and IHOP gives away free pancakes. People wait in line for hours just to save \$4.79 on a short stack of pancakes. Cars lined up around the block to get through Taco Bell's drive through on National Taco Day as they gave away a free Doritos Loco Taco. July 19 was National Ice Cream Day. Even during the Coronavirus pandemic, people gathered in crowds for their free scoops of ice cream.

People love free food. This was no less true in Jesus' day as it is in ours. Of all the miracles Jesus performed, only one is recorded in all four gospels. This is the feeding of the 5,000. This is the miracle where Jesus took a bag lunch brought by a boy, five small loaves of bread and two fish, and used it to feed a massive crowd. The number of men alone was 5,000. By the time you add in women and children, 15,000 is by no means an unreasonable estimate. This was a miracle with an arena full of eye witnesses. It obviously had an impact, and this was the peak of Jesus' popularity.

It also had an impact on Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and all thought essential to their story of Jesus. John gives this miraculous meal and its ensuing events the most extensive coverage.

After the meal, the disciples escaped the pressing crowds by getting into a boat and crossing the Sea of Galilee. This is where the miracle of Jesus walking on water takes place.

The next morning the crowds all notice that Jesus is gone. He is so popular at this point that they are ready to make him king. This is because Jesus filled their bellies full of bread and fish. Everyone is looking for Jesus. About this time someone checks their Twitter and sees that Jesus is on the other side of the lake. So, thousands of people get in boats and make their way to the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

When they finally track Jesus down, here's what he tells them. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves."* You love me because I gave you free food.

Jesus then launches into this "Bread of Life" sermon. He calls on them to desire the true bread from heaven that truly satisfies. So, the people say, *"Give us this bread."*

This is when Jesus drops the bomb. He says, *"I am the bread of life."* And then it's like Jesus is doing his darndest to drive the people away. He starts saying some hard stuff. He starts saying some weird stuff. Afterwards, even the disciples say, *"This is a hard saying; who can listen to it."*

The hardest, weirdest thing Jesus says comes in verse 53, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."* Filled with metaphor? Yes. Highly symbolic? True. But there is no denying that this is hard to wrap your head around.

The bottom line, though, is that of all the things we could desire in life, nothing is needed more than Jesus. Your soul hungers for something that only Jesus satisfies. Jesus would later build on

this bread of life imagery when sits down with his disciples for their final Passover meal. He takes the unleavened bread from that meal. He tears it apart and gives pieces to each of the disciples, and says, *“This is my body, which is given for you.”*

For 2,000 years followers of Jesus have been eating bread that represents the body of Jesus, and drinking the fruit of the vine which represents the blood of Jesus. Disgusting? Certainly. Gross. Absolutely.

In fact, early Christians were scurrilously charged with being cannibals, because the pagans had heard these ugly rumors of Christians eating the body and the blood in their assemblies. This was an accusation that early Christian leaders readily refuted and debunked.

But we continue to eat the body and drink the blood. We may call it communion, the Lord’s Supper, or the Eucharist which comes from the Greek word for giving thanks. We may take it every week, or every month, or every quarter. We may break bread off a loaf, or eat tiny chicklets of unleavened bread. We may drink grape juice or real wine. But regardless of HOW we do it, it is something we all do. Why?

There is something holy and mysterious about communion. I want to talk this morning about what communion is and why we do it. I want to couch it in terms of four directions that we look in communion. The Lord’s Supper calls us to focus our hearts and minds in four directions.

### **Look Back**

The first, and perhaps the most obvious direction is that we need to look back. Communion is a look back to Jesus, his life, his death, his sacrifice for our sins. This becomes obvious from the gospel accounts where on his last night before his crucifixion, Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with his disciples. He takes this ancient celebration that had defined God’s people for thousands of years, and he refocuses it on himself. Luke 22:19 says,

*And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”*

Remember me, Jesus. Look back and remember. Among all the other things it is, the Lord’s Supper is a memorial meal. Communion is designed so that we remember. Remember Jesus. Remember who He is. Remember what He did. Remember why he did it.

We must be reminded to remember because it is so easy for us to forget. It’s why I have notes. Even though I’ve been working on this sermon for two weeks. Even though I’ve practiced it five times, I forget what it was I wanted to say.

We need reminders because we forget. “Honey, did you get the milk? You were supposed to pick up some milk.” “Oh, crud. I’m sorry. I forgot, but I got ice cream.” It’s so easy to forget.

Did you know that your brain is designed to forget? Scientists now believe that the default mode of our brains is to forget.<sup>i</sup> And not just birthdays, anniversaries, and shopping lists. There's a part of our brains called the hippocampus, and one of its jobs, researchers have discovered, is that it has neurons that erase memories. Your brain is wired to forget. This happens while you sleep. It's in that deep R.E.M. stage of sleep when you dream. Basically, your brain is in disk cleanup mode getting rid of all that clutter you don't need. Your brain is deciding which memories to keep and which ones to throw out with the trash.

This is a valuable function. Think of how much information your brain processes every day. How many conversations, how many webpages, how much video, how much audio, how much noise, how many tastes and smells; Think of how many cars you see every day, and all of this data passes through your five senses and gets stored inside the gelatinous blob inside our skulls. You can't keep all of it. One researcher says, "Without forgetting, we would have no memory at all." We hold on to the important stuff by throwing out the unimportant stuff.

Communion is a way of telling yourself, "This is important stuff." Remember. Don't forget. We need to remember that sin is a big deal. We need to remember that we are sinners in need of salvation. We need to remember that our sin meant his death and that his death means our life. We need to remember.

This is more, though, than just remembering a date or a phone number, or a detail from a conversation three days ago. The Lord's Supper is a collective memory that's passed down for generations. This is something we must remember as a people. We pass this down from one generation to the next. Communion is this shared experience that was given by Jesus himself to the earliest Christians. It has been passed on by each generation of believer. It has been entrusted to us, and we must be faithful to pass it on to the next.

Let me give just a bit of an idea of what I'm talking about. Do you realize that the youngest adults today, those my daughter Allison's age, Zach's age, have no first hand memory of 9-11? That defining event, which shaped and scarred a generation of Americans, which we swore to never forget, to always remember, they have no conscious memory of it. The only memory they can have of it, is what we collectively pass on to them.

In the same way the generation before them has no conscious memory of the space shuttle Challenger exploding or life before computers became a ubiquitous presence in our lives. The generation before them has no memory of Vietnam, the JFK assassination, the moon landing, or Woodstock. And think about this, there is now a whole generation of people who are grandparents or even great grandparents who have no first-hand memory of Korea, D-Day, or the dropping of the atomic bomb. I remember as a kid talking to a lady who had moved to Kansas as a little girl on a covered wagon. She could remember that. These things become cultural memories because we pass them on. We memorialize them.

Every time we take communion, there is a passing of the torch taking place. We are passing a memory on from one generation to the next. We are building community awareness. This is why we must look back.

### **Look Forward**

But the Lord's Supper doesn't end with looking back. We look forward. We look through the bread and the cup and look ahead. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul has a lot to say to a church that has made a mess of communion. You might think our little plastic cups with their Styrofoam wafers are a challenge, but we've got nothing on the First Christian Church of Corinth.

One of the things Paul tells the Christians in Corinth about Communion in 1 Corinthians 11:26, *"For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death **until he comes.**"* I want draw your attention to that final phrase, *"until he comes."* We look back to remember to move us forward toward a goal, and that goal is the second coming of Jesus.

You see in communion, we reach back with one hand to Jesus first coming, and with the other hand we reach forward to the second coming of Jesus. The Lord's Supper focuses us on the hope and promise of eternity. It reminds us that Jesus is coming again. None of what we endure in the here and now is for nothing. This is all going somewhere. It's building toward something.

The Lord's Supper is a reenactment of the Last Supper Jesus shared with his disciples, but it points us forward to what will be the true Last Supper in the New Heaven and New Earth. Revelation 19:9 says, "Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb."

This simple shared meal reminds us that one day we will share in a feast. Not just a thimble and a wafer, but a banquet. It won't be in memory of Jesus. It will be with Jesus. In this way, communion is always relevant. It is always cutting edge. It will always be exactly what is needed.

Churches change over the years. Styles of preaching change. Styles of music change. Church buildings change. Church government changes. How preachers dress when they preach changes, but one thing never changes- God's people take the Lord's Supper together.

### **Look In**

The first two directions we look move us through time. The next two are more of a psychological journey. In Communion we must look in. The bread and the wine are an opportunity to take a deep look inside ourselves in light of the life and death of Jesus.

This is something Scripture specifically commands us to do. Paul tells the Christians in Corinth about the proper attitude they should have partaking of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:28, *"Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup."*

Communion is a time not to only think about Jesus. It's an opportunity to think about yourself. The word Paul uses here is the idea of applying scrutiny to yourself, to test yourself.

Have you ever bought an item of clothing and you reach into the pocket and pull out a slip of paper. It says, "Inspected by 32." You wonder who 32 is and just how did they inspect your pants? Of course, that label is to give you the assurance that your pants are well made and they are not going to rip from stem to stern at the most embarrassing moment. They are going to withstand the rigors of your daily life.

Think of communion as a weekly quality check of your life. Are there any parts wearing thin? Are there any seams stretched to the breaking point? Are there some loose threads? Maybe there are some holes that need repaired.

And here is why regular communion is important. You never brush your teeth as well as before a dentist appointment. You can tell the hygienist that you brush and floss just like you should, but they can tell the truth. Three days of really good brushing doesn't undo 6<sup>th</sup> months of so-so brushing. The Lord's Supper is a time for honest self-assessment. In view of who Jesus is, who am I?

It is a time of self-judgment so that we can find the grace we need. Self-judgment now prevents divine judgement later. Paul says in verse 32, "But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged." Paul speaks rather sternly about some hard things that happen in our lives because we do not examine ourselves like we should. This is why I don't like the idea of communion only once a year, or four times a year. I know I need self-examination more than that.

Communion should never be entered into lightly, and I think in many cases we should take it far more seriously than we do. Dare I say that maybe some weeks we shouldn't take it? At least until we take care of some other matters first. In all my years of ministry, I've never had anyone call me in the middle of the week and ask if they could come by the church and pick up some communion elements, because they couldn't take it on Sunday. They had something else to do first. But we need to take a good look in.

### **Look Out**

Through the bread and through the cup we look back, we look forward, and we look in. There is a fourth way we need to look, and that is we need look out. Not like a backseat driver who yells, "Look out!" I mean look outward. Look outside of yourself. Look to others.

Communion reminds us that we are a part of a community. In the New Testament communion is never a private, isolated, or individual activity. I suppose you could do it by yourself, and still look back, look forward, and look in. But it's no accident that that communion in Bible is always taken in community. The twelve with Jesus. The believers at Troas who gathered on the first day of the week to break bread with Paul.

In 1 Corinthians 11 in describing their celebration of the Lord's Supper, Paul uses the phrase "come together" five times. The Lord's Supper is a time for us to come together. Communion is not a private time between you and God. It's a community event for the entire body. This has been one of the challenges of Covid 19. How do we do this together while staying apart. I know a lot of churches of dispensed with communion, but we need this. This is important. This is a big deal.

The book "The Insanity of God" has a very powerful account of believers in a country where the church is persecuted arriving randomly over a period of hours, just so they can take communion together. At one point, after travelling some distance, only two believers are gathered for the Lord's Suppers, and they realize, that is far as they know, they are the only two free Christians left in the entire country. What would communion mean to you, if you had to risk your life to do it? Yeah, ponder that one for a while.

In a sermon all about communion, it's appropriate that our response to this message is to take communion. In a moment we are going to "come together" to look back, to look forward, to look in, and to look out.

Tracie Jeter is going to lead us into this time of communion.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.quantamagazine.org/to-remember-the-brain-must-actively-forget-20180724/>