

Holy, Horrid, and Hilarious Meals of the Bible

Part 1: The Last Supper, and the One After That

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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 11:20-39; Acts 2:37-47

"Do this in remembrance of me" On this Memorial Day weekend in which we remember those who have given their lives for our country, it is fitting to begin our series, "Holy, Horrid, and Hilarious Meals of the Bible," with a meal eaten in remembrance of One who gave his life for all the peoples of the world: Holy Communion. Only, the Communion meal that is the focus of Paul's writing this morning might be more accurately called *Horrid* Communion. Learning what made Communion holy or horrid in the early days of Christianity tells us a lot of surprising things about what they understood about this most famous of meals. It also provides us surprising insight for our daily lives.

Speaking of meals, I can always count on having a great meal on Memorial Day weekend. That's because, every year, a couple dozen friends gather for a really fun potluck. This potluck is particularly special for two reasons. First, the food is generally fabulous. While there are no rules about what food you share, everyone knows that you don't just pick up a bucket of KFC or potato salad from Hy-Vee on your way there. You show up with something delicious and homemade or you don't show up at all. A couple weeks before the potluck, those who are coming even begin emailing each other about what they intend to bring, partly to ensure that a wide variety of dishes show up and partly to get the others on the list salivating!

Besides great food, the other thing I love about this particular potluck is that you can always count on great conversation. The conversation is great not only because interesting people show up, but because there is always one long table that can seat about a dozen people who are willing to follow one rule that is considered sacred at this particular table: Only one conversation is allowed at a time.

Whether we're discussing current events, or sharing personal stories, or talking about politics or religion (yes, both subjects come up), there are no sidebar

conversations. Everyone listens to the main conversation, and those who want to share something may do so without having to shout over a bunch of chatter.

I wish all potlucks ran this way – people offering their best food and everyone paying attention to whatever conversation is being had at the table.

This is actually the kind of meal that first-century Christians enjoyed each and every Sunday – not just on Memorial Day weekend. This is because Christians partook of Communion every Sunday and Communion was a potluck meal, not just a microscopic piece of bread dipped into a cup of wine or grape juice. Since there were no Kentucky Fried Chickens or Hy-Vees back then, everything brought to the meal was homemade, and because it was a meal partaken in remembrance of Jesus, people put their best foot forward – or rather, their best dish. And because the meal was considered a vital part of their worship experience, you could tend to count on receiving plenty of food for thought, not just for the stomach, as people sat together around a common table.

This kind of worship format seems so appealing and satisfying to the soul that I'm a bit surprised that Christians ever departed from the practice. Of course, if the Communion meals were practiced like the ones in Corinth, perhaps that's the reason. What makes Paul so angry about their practice is that anyone who had been looking forward all week to a great meal and soulful conversation, but came a bit late, would find that the food was gone and the wine was drunk. And the people were, by then, drunk.

Paul's vexation was not just about dinner etiquette. In his day, those who showed up late were mostly people who were so poor that they had to work on their Sabbath just to survive and, because they were working, probably weren't bringing a dish to share that they could fall back on if the food was out.

With this context as background, perhaps Paul's rebuke of the Corinthian congregation is clearer to you now:

"When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you! ... Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the

Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.” (1 Cor 11:20-22, 27-29)

Paul equates lack of respect for the (largely poor) latecomers with lack of respect for Jesus himself. Curiously, according to Paul, this lack of respect has actually caused people to get sick and some to even die!

Incidentally, if you've ever wondered why the Catholic Church does not allow non-Catholics to take Communion, it is because of Paul's assertion that "those who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves." They refuse us Communion not to judge us but to protect us, at least according to Catholic doctrine. For, in their view, we regularly fail to discern "the body" which, according to Catholic belief, means failing to realize that the bread and wine are "transubstantiated" when the priest consecrates the elements – which is the theological way of saying "turned into Christ's literal body and literal blood."

Protestant Christians don't share this belief. Yet, while we believe that the bread and wine remain unchanged, we still ascribe a certain holiness to the Communion elements because they change *us*. They move us to remember Jesus, what he has done for us. They move us to open our hearts to receive God's grace and love, and in so doing we are motivated to share with others the same grace and love we have received.

I do not share the Catholic belief in transubstantiation and I think Christians of the first century would be puzzled by the idea. But I suspect that Christians of the first century would be just as puzzled by the way we Protestants practice Communion, if not more so, because, first, most Protestants don't partake of Communion more than once a month, or even once a quarter, and, second, because we don't practice Communion as a stomach-and-soul-filling potluck each and every Sunday.

Are we failing to "discern the body" when we are content simply to dip a piece of bread into a cup and call it Communion? What would be the benefit if we held to the more ancient practice?

In our reading from the Book of Acts – which is a continuation of Peter's speech to the crowd of onlookers on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and caused quite a stir – Luke (the author of Acts) explains

that about 3,000 people decided to follow the Christian path after hearing Peter's speech and that, from then on, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." In other words, they devoted themselves to a weekly potluck. Only it wasn't a potluck as we know it. It was a potluck where they prayed, shared food (all homemade!), got caught up on each other's lives, and had an engaging discussion about a Christian teaching – where there was only one conversation at the table! Yes, the Church of the First Century – which Christianity has looked back on with admiration as being especially vital, courageous, and resilient in the face of intense persecution – was, in essence, a Dinner Church.

Why would a Dinner Church be so powerful? Frankly, I would love the opportunity to find out. Perhaps we will one day. (Anyone up for a weekly potluck like this?) I suspect that Peter gives a significant clue as to why Dinner Church was so powerful in his speech that is said to have converted so many people. Peter exhorts the crowd to:

"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him ... Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." (Acts 2:38-40)

These days, when we hear Peter's words, we picture a fire-and-brimstone street preacher, threatening people to believe in Jesus or burn in hell. Yet when you break down what Peter is actually saying, you get the feeling that so many people converted not because they felt threatened but because they were so strongly drawn to something positive. Let's consider the primary words and phrases for a moment:

(1) **"Repent"** As you know by now (if you've been hanging around Countryside for very long), this word doesn't mean "beat yourself up for being so bad." Rather, the Greek word being used here, *metanoia*, means "change your whole way of thinking."

(2) **"in the name of Jesus"** If you worshipped at Countryside last week, then you know that the "in the name of Jesus" does not actually refer to Jesus' literal name, but to the way of life that Jesus taught and lived. Last week we called it the "4G" way of life, that is, practicing the **3 Great Loves** (Love of God, Love of Neighbor, Love of Self), and receiving the fourth "G": **Grace**, which means in essence, "know

that you don't have to have your life all put together for God to love and guide you."

(3) "**receive the Holy Spirit**" This means that when you love God, neighbor, and self all together, and you don't get so caught up on where you or others fall short, you will start to see the world as Jesus saw it, because you will be filled by the same Spirit that filled Jesus.

(4) "**For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.**" In other words, there are no "insiders" here, no V.I.P.s, no chosen few. Anyone whose heart moves them to love as Jesus loved and who will accept enough Grace to cover them when they fail to love in this way, is welcomed to the table of fellowship – the weekly potluck – with open arms.

(5) "**Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.**" Notice what Peter is *not* saying here. He's not saying, "save yourselves from hell." He's saying "do not allow a society that is fraying at the seams, tearing itself apart, and locked in a race to the very bottom of the gutter, to determine your life's path." Do you see our own society headed in a similar direction? Then perhaps you will hear Peter's words as a promise spoken directly to you.

Putting this all together, Peter is telling you: "Change your whole way of thinking! You don't have to participate in society's race to the gutter. You don't have to withdraw from the world, but rather, allow God to help you see the world as Jesus saw it. Then, you will see that life is about loving God, those around you, and you yourself. And it's about loving a God who pours out vast amounts of grace to cover you when you don't love God, your neighbor, or yourself as much as you should. Don't let society mold you into someone in its own image – someone who seeks salvation in material success, or in power over others, or in military might. Rather, in Jesus we know that salvation is about discovering you are loved beyond your wildest imagination and orienting your life in light of your discovery. Then, a path will open before you that leads not into the gutter, but to fullness of life."

If you were around in Peter's day, hearing him promise all these things, would you be skeptical? If you were (or *are*), I have a feeling I know what Peter would suggest: "Why not come by my house this Sunday where my friends and I are having a potluck. Bring a covered dish, an open heart, and open eyes so that you

can see for yourself what happens when people begin to live like God's promises are real."