

At the Table with Jesus
Matthew 26:26-29
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
October 9, 2022
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

There is something magical that happens when people sit down to eat together.

Whether it is that moment after work and school, before evening activities commence, when families sit, even briefly, to look at one another and say, "How was your day?"...

Whether it is a meal shared with old friends where laughter is the main course...

Whether it is a place to get to know someone new with simple questions being shared between bites of food...

Being at the table together matters.

This is true in our life *and* in our faith. And here in worship, it is central to who we are as Disciples. From the very beginning, our founders (who we remember were working for Christian unity, not intending to form a new denomination) read the New Testament and heard stories of the early church gathering at the table and they knew it must be part of what we do. So, every week when we gather to worship, we come to the table.

We come to the table and we remember Jesus. We remember the way he lived. We remember the commitments he held to living in God's ways, even when it cost him his life. We remember the words he spoke of forgiveness, and of covenant, and of love.

We come and we remember. But we do more than that.

We come and we meet Jesus at the table.

Now, I used the word magical earlier when talking about table experiences, but meeting Jesus here isn't magical so much as mystical. In some way, beyond our comprehension, we meet Jesus in the act of eating the bread and drinking from the cup.

And the reality is that there have been theological conversations across millennia about exactly how Jesus shows up. Does the substance of the bread and juice or wine change? Is it not the physical substance but the real presence of Jesus that appears at the table? Is it less about the elements themselves and more about their symbolic nature? Does it matter that the Aramaic language, which Jesus would have spoken, doesn't have a word for the physical body, but instead uses body to represent the idea of "self" (Eugene Boring, "Matthew" in *New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VII*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995; page 471) - does that make any difference in our

understanding? Debates have been had and denominations broken apart over these and other options.

And yet, perhaps it is not so much about knowing exactly how, but about allowing ourselves to enter into the experience of meeting Jesus in this meal.

Meeting Jesus whether we gather in the sanctuary or worship from our living rooms.

Meeting Jesus whether we tear a generous hunk from a common loaf of bread or open our pre-packaged communion to carefully place the near-tasteless wafer on our tongues.

What happens if we come prepared to meet Jesus in communion? What happens if we experience communion as a time to be at the table with Jesus?

Well, if we look to Matthew's telling of this story, then part of what we realize is that when we come to the table with Jesus, we are not only valued...we are not only forgiven...we are also called to live in ways that both hope for and help bring about God's kin-dom.

There are a variety of versions of this story in the Bible, but Matthew's Jesus ends these words saying, "I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29, NRSV).

And while we, two thousand years later, might hear that as a reference to a heavenly afterlife, remember the idea of heaven wasn't developed in Jesus' time the way it is in ours. Rather, this is set "in the context of Matthew's theme of the conflict of kingdoms" (Boring, 471). Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is leading the people in the ways of God which are frequently in contrast to the ways of this world, the ways - in Jesus' time - of the Roman empire. Jesus is not only pointing toward what the reign of God looks like, but calling disciples to live in those ways.

In sharing his life and this meal, Jesus not only invites his followers to wait for God's reign, but to live and work in such ways as to help bring it to reality.

So, Jesus says, "I am with you now."

Jesus says, "I will be with you as you labor on in the good work of living in God's ways."

Jesus says, "We will celebrate together when God's kin-dom comes in its fullness."

Well, friends, like Matthew's community...we aren't quite to the point where the fullness of God's kin-dom has come. Rather we are still in the stages of working for that reality.

So, we gather again and again at the table, not only to be with Jesus here, but to recommit ourselves to live in Jesus' ways tomorrow and the next day and the next, even when it is difficult and when the ways of God conflict with the ways of our world.

Communion is a gift we receive - a gift of love, of forgiveness, of community, of hope. And it is *more* than a gift we receive. It is a commitment we make because what we do at the table as we meet Jesus, it asks something of us in response.

Throughout this month we are going to be talking about stories at the table. And we are going to keep asking questions about how we are called to go from bread and cup to faith and giving. We are going to keep looking at the ways that Jesus and his followers allowed the meals they shared to shape the lives they led.

So, how do our experiences with Jesus at the communion table send us out to live faithfully, generously, lovingly? How do we allow ourselves to be shaped by what we experience here in worship so that our lives are changed by being at the table with Jesus?

And how do our experiences with others...at the communion table...at coffee shop tables...at Free Lunch tables...at picnic tables...at fellowship meal tables - how do these experiences shape us to live in greater harmony with all of God's children and God's creation?

Friends, we are not only called to worship on Sunday mornings, but we are called to live lives of love and generosity, lives that reflect the heart of God and the faithfulness of Jesus. And the beauty is that when we answer that call together as a community, when we pool our gifts and resources for the ministry we share, we become more able to make a difference in our world. We become more able to not only experience Jesus here, but to carry the experience of Jesus into the world in order that others might know God's love. Friends, this is our calling. May we say yes. Amen.