

INVOKING A HOLY MOMENT

One by one, they slip into the front room of the small house that is but four streets from the Tiber River. The house is in an alley, and it is dimly lit; the year is 150. Their heads are covered.

With barely visible eyes trained on the unfocused ground, they usher themselves in. They look like slaves, and no one on the streets has paid them much attention. Before long, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen are gathered.

Safely inside, smiles embrace each other, and packages of food concealed under their robes are brought out. Another, carefully unfolds a collection of well worn, tattered parchments that were also secretly brought in.

A few words are shared, but soon, without prompting, they each give the “kiss of Peace” to each other and gather on the floor in a circle.

Each person feels the warmth of comradery and sense of anticipation. This is a very special occasion. This is communion in the early church.

Justin Martyr, a church leader in the mid second century, wrote about such gatherings, and outlined procedural guidelines for the small groups.

On one occasion he wrote, “And on the day called Sunday there is a meeting in one place of those who live in cities or the country, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as time permits.”

He also revealed that testimonies and prayers are shared, and an offering is taken, or as Justin Martyr stated, “alms are collected for the needy.”

He noted that if there is **not** time for a meal, then the [leader of the group] presents the bread and cup, and each are to partake as directed by the Apostle Paulbased on the same writings we used for today’s text– I Corinthians 11:23-28.

Justin Martyr added, that if someone was absent, then the deacons were to take the elements to them at a later time.

Back to the group meeting in Rome:

This small group read some of the tattered copies of letters that they had brought with them—copies of old letters from Paul, Thomas and others.

Following the readings, they take a collection, and then the leader of the group reaches for the bag that contains the bread and wine, but before she does, **they hear a knock at the door.** It is a stranger.

With the door barely open, the leader asks the stranger’s business.

He asserts that he has heard that Christians are meeting here, and would like to join them.

She asks, “why are you interested?”

The stranger replies, “I have heard of your charity and kindness, I am here to find out why / to learn more.”

With cautious trust, the leader invites him in. The stranger is asked if he knows Jesus. He responds that he hasn't had the pleasure, yet.

Then it is explained that they were about to partake of something very important, that they would love to talk to him later, and he is asked to sit off to the side, for now. Only committed, baptized believers share in the Lord's bread and cup.

The stranger strains to see what is going on, but the light is poor.

However, he can hear everything very clearly. When they are finished with their ceremony, they close their eyes and talk out loud to someone the visitor can not see.

The Stranger then takes advantage of this opportunity, and slips out through the door, ...and he then quickly alerts the Roman guards who were waiting around the corner.

They rush in as the stranger yells his accusations, "THESE ARE CHRISTIANS, AND THEY ARE HAVING AN ILLEGAL MEETING, AND THEY ARE CANNIBALS. THEY HAVE JUST FINISHED A MEAL OF FLESH AND BLOOD.

All of the Christians are taken away, and their families do not hear from them again.

The stranger didn't understand. He didn't understand the power of the fellowship – the "communion" of believers.

Moreover, he didn't understand that he was witnessing a DRAMA, a drama to keep a memory, a drama of proclamation, and drama to prompt a holy moment.

He didn't understand.

For the early church, the Lord's supper (what we call communion) .. was **vital** important. It was important enough that Christians were willing to risk death just to be a part of it.

At first, communion was an add-on to the Jewish pageantry of the *Love feast*, and the gatherings were known as "Koinonia," which means fellowship.

Some of those "feasts" got a little zesty with perhaps too much wine. We have all read of Paul's concern about those incidents.

Later, as Christians became more Gentile in orientation, the grand meal was dropped, and the Lord's supper became known as the "Eucharistia"– which is Greek for thanksgiving. We are familiar with the derived word, Eucharist.

Even without the appeal of a "potluck" meal, Christians regularly joined together to do communion, in spite of the risks.

During those early, formative years of the church, communion was a joyous and special occasion. It was a time to gather together in communion, to give offerings, and to remember the life and death of Jesus.

To be sure, those dangerous and blessed gatherings were often "holy" moments—something beyond "self" / beyond the mundane was keenly felt.

Over time and for many reasons, the fellowship and the mutual sharing aspect of communion faded away.

The unique occasion was controlled by the church. It became a sacrament given by the clerics to the laity. Lost was the joy and delight of the fellowship. It became an act of submission and obedience, and there were lots of detailed rules to follow, too. Still, people participated, in part, to sense a holy moment.

Augustine, in the 5th century, tried to remind all Christians of the unity that should be found in communion, saying, “Being many, [there is] one body. Remember bread is not made of one grain but of many.... Be what you see and receive what you are.”
He gave a similar analogy with the Chalice, encouraging followers to grasp the wholeness of communion.

Yet, strict rules can squelch good fellowship,.... and make it harder to sense the holy.

Here are some examples from Benedict’s Rules for communion, written in the year 543:
“Him who has bitten the cup of salvation with his teeth, [shall receive] six blows, [from a whip]. ...
A priest when celebrating who has not trimmed his nails, and a deacon, whose beard has not been shaved, and he who approaches the chalice straight from farm work will receive six blows....
He who with unclean hands receives the blessed bread, will receive 12 blows.”
{ Can I borrow a pair of nail trimmers? }

{ And, the ushers will check to see if your hands are clean..... }

I imagine worrying about being whipped would diminish some of the joyous anticipation that used to proceed communion.

I’m glad we don’t have to worry about such rules and regulations, yet it seems,... we’ve not fully reclaimed the enthusiasm and eager expectation that the early Christians seemed to have.

It is good that communion is not the sanctified burden it once was, but I fear that for many of us, Communion has become just a quarterly obligation—something we just do, whether we like it our not, instead being a meaningful and holy experience.

To keep “communion” vibrant and meaningful we must remind ourselves why we partake of the ceremony, and we must periodically breathe new life into it.

First of all, this ceremony is not done in solitude.

Too often, in life, we feel alone and are alone.

The re-enactment of the last supper serves to bring believers together—to commune and to find strength and encourage in realizing we are NOT alone. Communion is not done in solitude. It is done in community.

Today is World Communion Sunday. We are gathered here as followers of Christ pausing to do communion, and we can find strength in knowing that believers all over the world are in this union with us.

We are not alone. We have each other.

Also, we do communion to recall / to remember the life and passion of Jesus. Symbolically, we take on the way of Jesus through the bread and cup. We remember how Jesus gave his all in serving God,..... and so remembering reminds us that we have been baptized and we have made a commitment to follow the way of Christ... to give our all.

AND,.....communion is a type of ritual intended to be an invitation.

We try to repeat the conditions that have made communion a holy moment in the past.

Holy moments are when we sense the closeness of God.

Holy moments are wonderful moments when we transcend / when we see beyond ourselves and the limits of the normal world—moments of awe..... when we are kissed by the divine.

Sometimes holy moments are serendipitous – a wonderful, surprising event. So, if possible, we try to create the conditions that will allow that awe / that holy moment to be repeated.

In other words, we think to ourselves, “it was amazing the last time, let’s try it again.”

We do this in many ways, be it lighting a candle when we pray.... or our special occasion rituals, such as Christmas events.

This is part of the reason we do communion.

God’s Spirit has been keenly felt in the past, when we did communion, so we do againas an invitation for God to touch us once more.

After we sing a hymn, we will repeat what we’ve done many times before, as an act of unity,..... to remember,..... and to invoke God’s Spirit.

Holy moments happen, more often than not, because we are open / because we are ready..... and because..... we **need** to feel God’s presence.

Today,.... let us sense our fellowship..... let us remember Jesus and our commitment to God.....AND..... let us invite God in, too.

A moment of prayer:

God we are here together. We are striving to be faithful,..... and we are ready for you.
Amen.