

Easter 5, year B

Awesome Communion

April 28, 2024

Rev Barbara Ballenger

Are you having an Awesome Communion so far? While our young folks learned some cool things about our Great Sacrament of Eucharist on Bread Day a few weeks ago, this Sunday isn't just for them. Just like you, they've been receiving Jesus in the bread and wine for some time now. But deciding to do it with intention, learning a little more about what's going on at this table on Sunday -- that can make that really familiar act sink much deeper inside. So that makes the kids in the stoles not just learners but teachers, teachers by example, though I'm sure if you asked them about Communion later they'd tell you all they know.

Their job today is to help all of us walk up to communion with a little more insight, a little more openness, a little more desire to be one with Jesus.

At our Bread Day retreat a few weeks ago, we told stories and we made things, because those are both great ways to really remember something. Because joining in the Lord's Supper is about remembering something very old, rather than learning something entirely new. We learned some important words to help us remember:

We learned the word, Communion – which seems like a combination of Come+union – come and be united. That's an important thing to remember about this meal. We come to it, we get ourselves there. And interestingly the gifts we bring to that meal – bread and wine that somebody made – God takes them gives them back to us as Godself, as Jesus. Come and Be United with me, and you'll be united God, Jesus is saying. Communion.

We also learned the word Eucharist – which means thanksgiving in Greek. Jesus gave thanks to God when he broke the bread. We are thankful for what Jesus gave to us in his death and resurrection – himself.

And Amen! We learned Amen! Which we say when we receive Communion. It's not the same thing as thank you. It's more like Yes! Jesus I believe that you are in that bread and wine. It also sounds a little like Come-In. Jesus comes knocking and our Amen is like saying "Hello Jesus. Come In." Can I get an Amen?

When Jesus comes knocking, how close does he want to get to us? How close does God want to be to us? Today we heard that God wants to get as close to us as a vine is to its branches. As the Christian musician Kieth Green used to sing “He is Divine and You are de-branch”

The vine and the branches, that’s a great image for Communion. On a grape vine the branches grow from a central vine that feeds them. A grape vine twists and turns through places, it’s on the move, taking those branches with it. And the branches are sent out from the vine, with leaves to collect the sun that the vine needs to grow and to keep winding its way through the forest. But as our version of today’s Gospel from John says “Branches don’t exist on their own. They have to be attached to the vine, don’t they?”

The vine feeds the branches and the branches feed the vine. And fruit grows from those branches. Jesus was probably thinking about grapes, which went into the wine that he shared at his last supper. The fruit of the vine feeds all sorts of hungry and thirsty creatures. The vine can’t do that without the branches.

When we had our Bread Day a few weeks ago, one of the kids asked if we were going to have a wine day as well. We just stuck to bread. Both both the bread and the wine answer the question: how close does God want to get to us? Food becomes part of us, it strengthens us, it nourishes us, and it becomes the blood in our veins, and cells in our body. Body and Blood – that’s how close God wants to get to us.

On our Bread Day we talked about how back in Jesus’ day the phrase Body and Blood meant one’s whole self. Sort of like we might say Body and Soul today. This is my body which is given for you, this is my blood that is shed for – this my whole self that I’m giving for you and to you, Jesus says. Jesus gave us his whole self when he came to be united to us, and to unite us to God. The bread and the wine, the Body and the Blood –God’s whole self is what is on offer at this table. Our whole self becomes part of God’s whole self. That’s how close God wants to get to us. That’s what Jesus made possible.

We also talked a little bit about that water that we mix with the wine during Communion. Back in Jesus day, wine was pretty strong stuff, so they mixed it with

water. More to go around that way too. But there's something neat about that water and the wine. Once you mix the water in, you can't get it out. It disappears. It becomes part of the wine. So close you can't see where one stops and the other begins— that's how close God wants to get to us.

We talked about how the bread that will be brought up here is bread that remembers. It remembers the story of Jesus' last supper, how Jesus asked us to remember his death on the cross when he eat bread and drink wine at this table. The bread remembers that altars are places where things are made sacred and holy – not where they die horrible deaths, but where they go from belonging to people to belonging to God. That's what the word sacrifice means. The bread remembers the stories of God that we tell, and the prayers we pray for one another. It remembers how much we need a God that wants to get that close to us. It remembers it so well that what it remembers happens. Again and again.

We learned a word for that kind of remembering in Seminary – it's anamnesis. We didn't discuss that word at Bread Day, but we did talk about what it meant. Our gifts of the bread and the wine remember the sacrifice of Jesus so well, that when we hear "this is my body and this my blood", that's what the bread becomes. Jesus.

Don't ask us how exactly. That's a mystery. But we do understand what it means to come and be united to Jesus and one another— that's something we can do. We can remember that Jesus is present in this bread. We can say Amen to that! And we can invite Jesus to come in – into our lives, into our hearts, into our whole selves when he comes by.

In the end God wants to get as close to us as love gets. "No one has seen God or knows what God looks like, but if we love one another, God actually lives in us, and when we love, then people will see God in us," we heard in our second reading. That's another great way to describe Communion – Come and be loved by God. Come and be United. Come and be fed.

And then take that love out into the world, like branches that reach out where the vine takes us. Like food and drink for hungry people. And make it an Awesome Communion!