

Luke 5:27–39 (CEB)

²⁷ Afterward, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at a kiosk for collecting taxes. Jesus said to him, “Follow me.”

²⁸ Levi got up, left everything behind, and followed him. ²⁹ Then Levi threw a great banquet for Jesus in his home. A large number of tax collectors and others sat down to eat with them. ³⁰ The Pharisees and their legal experts grumbled against his disciples. They said, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?”

³¹ Jesus answered, “Healthy people don’t need a doctor, but sick people do. ³² I didn’t come to call righteous people but sinners to change their hearts and lives.”

³³ Some people said to Jesus, “The disciples of John fast often and pray frequently. The disciples of the Pharisees do the same, but your disciples are always eating and drinking.”

³⁴ Jesus replied, “You can’t make the wedding guests fast while the groom is with them, can you? ³⁵ The days will come when the groom will be taken from them, and then they will fast.”

³⁶ Then he told them a parable. “No one tears a patch from a new garment to patch an old garment. Otherwise, the new garment would be ruined, and the new patch wouldn’t match the old garment. ³⁷ Nobody pours new wine into old wineskins. If they did, the new wine would burst the wineskins, the wine would spill, and the wineskins would be ruined. ³⁸ Instead, new wine must be put into new wineskins. ³⁹ No one who drinks a well-aged wine wants new wine, but says, ‘The well-aged wine is better.’”

1 Corinthians 11:17–26 (CEB)

¹⁷ Now I don’t praise you as I give the following instruction because when you meet together, it does more harm than good. ¹⁸ First of all, when you meet together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and I partly believe it. ¹⁹ It’s necessary that there are groups among you, to make it clear who is genuine. ²⁰ So when you get together in one place, it isn’t to eat the Lord’s meal. ²¹ Each of you goes ahead and eats a private meal. One person goes hungry while another is drunk. ²² Don’t you have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you look down on God’s churches and humiliate those who have nothing? What can I say to you? Will I praise you? No, I don’t praise you in this.

²³ I received a tradition from the Lord, which I also handed on to you: on the night on which he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread. ²⁴ After giving thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this to remember me.” ²⁵ He did the same thing with the cup, after they had eaten, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me.” ²⁶ Every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you broadcast the death of the Lord until he comes.

Who is really welcome to the table?

You don’t have to spend much time around organizations of all stripes to learn that there are in-groups and out-groups, those who are part of the inner circle and those who stand on the outside looking in. Indeed, most of us have probably learned that once a person is slotted as “in” or “out,” changing that status can be nearly impossible. Surely, this is one of the darker sides of human nature.

It wasn’t any different in first-century Israel. Led by the Pharisees, many Jews labeled as the out-group those whom they saw as sinful and unrighteous. The Essenes are a good example of those who embraced exclusion in the community of God’s people.

The Essenes were a group of Jews who had withdrawn from Jerusalem to establish a community at Qumran on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea.¹ Emphasizing purity,

¹The Dead Sea Scrolls are from the library of the Essene community. It is very possible that Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, spent some time with the Essenes. It is even possible that Jesus spent time at Qumran before beginning his public ministry. There is much more to the Essenes than we can talk about here.

the Essenes saw themselves as the true heirs of God's promises. They viewed other devout Jews with suspicion. The Essenes sought to be truly righteous (at least in their own eyes) as they awaited the arrival of God's kingdom – an event that would be focused upon themselves. Like many Jews, the Essenes believed that illness and injury were a result of sin. Thus, a crippled person or a leper would be placed in the “sinners out-group” and could not hold a leadership position in the Essene community. Here is part of their community rules: “Neither the blind nor the lame, nor the deaf nor the mute, nor the lepers, nor those whose flesh is blemished, shall be admitted to the council of the community.” Lepers were shunned by the Jews for more than mere medical reasons; they were seen as sinners, thus explaining their disease.

A shocking welcome

When we talk about welcoming everyone to the Lord's table, it is easy to let our minds glide along the surface and miss how shocking the word “everyone” can really be. When Jesus shared a table with tax-collectors or healed shunned lepers, he enacted a welcome that the average Jew on the street would have found most disturbing. Indeed, with the tax collector sitting next to him and the Pharisees on the outside looking in, it is as if Jesus said, “Imagine whoever you think just could not be welcome at God's table . . . well, they will be the first in the door.”

Jesus turned everything upside down. He consistently demonstrated that the New Covenant people of God were to be shaped by neither rules-keeping nor exclusion. Rather, by extending welcome in the way that he did, Jesus demonstrated the concrete reality of God's forgiveness, a forgiveness that was to be the central characteristic of God's people. Simply put, Jesus called the Jews to a new understanding and a new way of being God's covenant people.

A welcome home

There is still more to Jesus' welcome. Jesus' fellow Jews knew that although they lived in the land of Israel, for all practical purposes they still lived in exile under the thumb of foreign rulers. In their minds, they had labored under this exile for centuries as punishment for their sins. Now, they fervently awaited the end of this exile and the arrival of God's kingdom. Jesus' bold enactment of God's forgiveness and welcome was a claim that God's kingdom was indeed arriving and that, of course, Israel's sins were being forgiven. The exile was ending. The banquet doors were thrown wide open!

There is nothing that we can do to place ourselves beyond the reach of God's love and forgiveness. In turn, the welcome we extend to others must bear true forgiveness and inclusion. When we welcome others into God's house and God's family, we are welcoming them home.

So Jesus feasted with the “tax collectors and sinners” to the dismay of the seemingly righteous Jews, led by the Pharisees. He reminded his accusers that he would not be with them much longer. And he told them a parable (v. 36-39). Darrell Bock helps us understand this enigmatic story:

Jesus is like a new piece of cloth. No seamstress worth her salt would take a new piece of cloth and patch it onto an old garment. Such a match produces two problems. The new cloth will tear the old, and the pieces of material will not match. There is irony here: the patch that is supposed to fix the garment would end up ruining both. This new era Jesus brings simply cannot be wed to the old practices. It is new and requires new ways.

The second picture involves wine and wineskins. In the first century, wineskins would have been made of goatskin or sheepskin taken from the neck area of the animal (Gen 21:14–15; 19; Ps 119:83). Again, the result of putting new wine into old skins would be disaster, a tragic waste of wine. The new wine would ferment and cause the old wineskins to burst—the new wine would then be lost and the wineskin rendered useless.

There can be no syncretism [combination] between what Jesus brings and the old

tradition of Judaism. If it were tried, both would be destroyed. Jesus brings a new era and a fresh approach to God that cannot be mixed with the old traditions. In many ways the book of Acts is the historical outworking of this point. The gospel is a new way, so the practices of Judaism cannot contain it. This is why Luke will later call Jesus a prophet like Moses (Lk 9:35; Acts 3:12–26; see Deut 18:15). Jesus, like Moses, is the leader-prophet of a freshly formed community of God, revealing the new ways the new movement requires.

So *new wine must be poured into new wineskins*. Jesus' presence requires a new way, new forms and a new spirit. Even when fasting continues after the bridegroom is gone, it will be different. It will always be done in hope of his return.²

And so we invite all to come. We welcome them not only to St. Andrew, but also to the

Transubstantiation

There's a mouthful. Many protestants think Roman Catholics believe that at Communion, the bread and wine are magically changed into the body and blood of Christ. This seems like nonsense, since the bread and wine still look and taste like bread and wine. Perhaps this will help.

This Roman Catholic doctrine is grounded in Aristotle's understanding of reality, as worked out by Thomas Aquinas and others.

Aristotle held that every object consists of *accidents* and *substance*. The object's *accidents* are all of its physical properties, everything that can be perceived by our senses. Its *substance* is its essence. For example, the *accidents* of this piece of paper you are holding are its color, size, texture, shape, smell and so on – everything that makes it paper so far as you can tell. But for Aristotle, its essence, its underlying “paper-ness” is something different; it is its *substance*. In other words, the piece of paper's *substance* is separate from the paper's physical properties.

Aquinas and others applied Aristotle's view of reality to the bread and wine of communion. The doctrine of transubstantiation (“conversion in substance”) holds that when the bread and wine are blessed, their *accidents* remain as they were. They still look and taste like bread and wine. But . . . the *substance* of the bread and wine is converted from “bread-ness” and “wine-ness” to “Christ-ness.” They may taste like bread and wine but the underlying reality is that they have become the body and blood of Christ. Thus, Roman Catholics claim the actual physical presence of Christ at Communion.

Lord's table, which should be a table of unity. Sadly, too often it is a place of division.

A bridge

Christians are all over the place when it comes to Holy Communion. We all (or at least, most) affirm that it is breathtakingly significant. But ask “what is really happening?” and you'll get a lot of answers. Scripture doesn't help much here. What exactly did Jesus mean when he said “This is my body . . . this is my blood?” or “Do this in remembrance of me.” The disciples were perplexed and so are we.

In keeping with John Wesley, Methodists are theologians of the middle. We are a bridging church. This reflects our roots in the Church of England, which, during the Protestant reformation, sought to hold together those who wanted to stay with Rome and those who sought a return to “primitive” Christianity (the Puritans, for example). We see this Methodist (and Anglican) commitment to finding the middle way, the *via media*, in many areas of Christian doctrine and practice, including our understanding of Holy Communion.³ Since we are searching for the middle way, let's look at the two extremes.

Rome and Zwingli

In the text box, I've tried to summarize the Roman Catholic view of Communion, namely, that by consecrating the elements (the bread and wine), they become the body and blood of Christ. For

² Bock, D. L. (1994). *Luke* (Lk 5:33). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

³This is way too big a topic for this short study. For more, you might read “This Holy Mystery: A UMC Understanding of Holy Communion,” which was adopted by the General Conference in 2004. It is available at www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/this-holy-mystery-a-united-methodist-understanding-of-holy-communion1.

a Catholic, when Jesus said, “This is my body,” he meant just that. But many Protestant reformers challenged that understanding. One, Huldrych Zwingli, held that the Lord’s Supper is merely a symbolic meal, a recalling or memorial of the Last Supper. Remembrance, then, becomes no more than recollection. Many Baptist and similar denominations hold this Zwinglian view.

You can see how these differing views would lead to very different practices. Daily Mass by Roman Catholics is understandable since they believe the Mass makes Christ physically present. Likewise, if Communion is no more than a symbolic recalling, then one might practice Communion infrequently.

The Real Presence of Christ

In our striving to find the middle way, United Methodists embrace that Jesus Christ is really present at Communion, in a way that he is not otherwise, but we do not try to explain exactly how we experience Christ’s presence. We hold that “in remembrance” is far more than a symbolic recalling of Jesus’ death; it is the dynamic re-presentation of the living Christ. This is from “This Holy Mystery,” a UMC paper on Communion:

“United Methodists, along with other Christian traditions, have tried to provide clear and faithful interpretations of Christ’s presence in the Holy Meal. Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. For United Methodists, the Lord’s Supper is anchored in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but is not primarily a remembrance or memorial. We do not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works. We understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms. In the Holy Meal of the church, the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God’s saving gift for the whole world.” [Underlining added]

Past, present, and future

When we come to the Lord’s table, we are stepping out of our own time and into God’s time. The past and the future come rushing to meet us. Think of it as living on heaven’s clock. The Jews grasped this. Each year at Passover, the father would gather the family together over the Passover meal, saying “This is the night when our God, the Holy One, blessed be he, came down to Egypt and rescued us from the Egyptians . . .” Of course, it wasn’t *the* night – at least not as we reckon time. But it was *the* night in God’s time. The family was one with their ancestors during that meal. They were the same family being rescued in an eternal act of salvation.

In the same way, when we come forward to partake of Holy Communion, we are with Christ, with the disciples, and with all the people of God. God’s future, his victory over sin and death, comes rushing to meet us over the Lord’s table. It all takes a lot of imagination doesn’t it. And it takes all of us, at one table, as one family. Truly, we are all one in Christ Jesus!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

It is difficult for us to grasp the shocking nature of Jesus’ welcome. Perhaps Jesus felt that he needed shock-value in order to penetrate the self-assured, self-righteous exclusion practiced by the Pharisees, the Essenes, and so many of Jesus’ fellow Jews (and the rest of humanity, then and now!). It follows that the question we need to be asking ourselves is this: Where do we practice exclusion? It is easy to be blind to this. We could approach the question this way: List the five people that we would find it hardest to forgive. Do we implicitly assume that there are people who have placed themselves outside the bounds of God’s forgiveness? Or perhaps we could put it this way, “God may forgive them, but I can’t.” Jesus calls us all to an expansive welcome, toward bold inclusion, and surprising forgiveness. How could we begin to put “shocking forgiveness” into action and welcome all to our own table?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Isaiah 25:6-10 A powerful image of God's banquet and our reconciliation with God. This passage will repay several slow, prayerful readings.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Matthew 21:28-32 Jesus tells a parable about who enters the doors of God's banquet first.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Matthew 22:1-14 The parable of the wedding banquet. (Again with the party!) This one is pretty clear – it is the “unsavory” street people who respond to the invitation and are welcomed to the wedding.</p>	<p>Thursday, Luke 7:35-50 A Pharisee cannot tolerate whom it is that Jesus has welcomed to the table.</p>
<p>Friday, Revelation 19:1-10 (esp. 9-10) The marriage supper of the Lamb. Marriage is a commonly used image for the relationship between God and God's people.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

