

## “Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees”

Matthew 26:17-29

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Whenever I am asked to share a religious experience I have had, I usually end up at a Communion table somewhere in the world. For me, the Communion meal takes us deep into the mystery of love, into the mystery of life itself, into the mystery of God. The Communion meal is beyond explanation. It is beyond the intellect. It is beyond language. It has more to do with the soul than the mind. It offers a certain transcendence that unites us with loved ones who have died, with loved ones who live far away, and even with ones we've not yet met, strangers waiting to become beloved brothers and sisters.

Religious experience is certainly not limited to the Communion table. In fact, most of us would name dozens of other locations where the encounter with God had been more intense, more personal, more meaningful and memorable. My hope is that a church can be a place where we all share those personal experiences of the Spirit that change us and give us new perspective and allow us to know that God is real.

On this World Communion Sunday, I choose to share two brief memories of Communion meals in the simple hope that my stories will put you in touch with your own stories of sacred awakening. These stories become our spiritual food, even as the bread and cup are our spiritual food.

In the summer of 1986, I took a van full of Wisconsin teenagers to the village of Little Eagle on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. Our mission was to provide a Vacation Bible School for the children of the Messiah United Church of Christ.

Our week there concluded with a service of Communion. Their pastor, Jay Taken Alive, and I were to co-officiate at the meal. Just as we approached the table, Rev. Taken Alive said to me, “You tell them about the bread; I’ll tell them about the buffalo.” And I proceeded to listen intently, as this Lakota brother lifted up the ancient symbol of the buffalo as a sign of sacrificial love, as a sign of food for the soul as well as for the body, as a sign of the blessedness of community and the sharing of all things in common. We stood there together, two ordained ministers in the United Church of Christ, using different language to proclaim the same good news, different metaphors for the same eternal truths. I don’t know how it was for him, but for me it was a moment of joyful transcendence when all of the ethnic and cultural and tribal and racial differences melted away, and we were just one; one church family.

The second story is from my own Confirmation year. We were in ninth grade in the First Congregational Church in Westfield, Massachusetts. Our minister, Rev. Gilbert, wanted to introduce us to Communion as he understood it. I’m sure this particular class was in the winter because it was dark outside at 7:00 p.m. that Sunday night. Next door to the church was an ancient brick building that had been boarded up. In its hay day it had been the city jail. Now long abandoned, the basement cell blocks were rusting away. None of us kids even knew it existed. Somehow, Rev. Gilbert had gotten a key to the basement door. We each lit a candle in the classroom, and we followed our minister outside, down the sidewalk, and then into this dungeon where men and women had once served their sentences for crimes they had committed. It was, by far, the spookiest place I had ever been.

As we walked through the jail, we came to a cell where Rev. Gilbert had prepared the bread and the cup. We sat on the cold, stone floor.

He invited us to imagine life in that cell, separated from loved ones, separated from community, alone with one's guilt. As we imagined the lonely lives of those prisoners, he began to sing, and then we were all singing, "Let us break bread together on our knees. Let us drink wine together on our knees. Let us praise God together on our knees." And I tell you, as we sang that Communion hymn, it was as if all the doors in all the cells in all the prisons flew open, and there was no longer free and not-free; there was just one community of people forgiven and blessed and loved.

If I choose the hymn, "Amazing Grace" a little too often for your liking, it is because of its second verse.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear  
The hour I first believed.'

On reflection, I see that it was there on the floor of the jail cell, eating the bread and sipping from the cup that I truly first believed. And whenever we sing that hymn, "Let Us Break Bread Together," I am transported back to ninth grade Confirmation, to the hour I first believed. And I suppose that is why I throw so much of my heart and soul into this ministry with young adults.

These two stories of Communion meals I share with you all on this World Communion Sunday as an invitation to reflect on your own moments of transcendence. For these are the moments that bind us together as a spiritual family. Perhaps someone here today will offer to be the editor of the South Church book of religious experiences. We'd each write one chapter. It would be ready for Lent in 2016. We would all write this book and read this book, and we'd all remain in the greatest of hope! Amen.

