

# Deborah Sokolove: Body of Christ, Cup of New Life

A Sermon for Seekers Church

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## Body of Christ, Cup of New Life

Once upon a time, Jesus was having dinner with his friends, and, as usual, he said a blessing over the bread and the wine before handing them round the table. He and his friends liked to sing and to tell stories, too, and dinner often took a long time as they sang and talked and laughed and, sometimes – if it was a sad story – they cried. But this last time that they all had dinner together, Jesus said some strange things. He said that the bread was his body, and the wine was his blood, and that whenever his friends got together to have a meal, they should remember him.

Jesus' friends didn't really understand what he was talking about. In fact, they were shocked, because it was against their religion to drink blood or to eat the flesh of a human being. But the next day, Jesus was crucified. Of course, all his friends were very sad – they had called him Messiah, Anointed One, Christ, and thought he was going to save them from all the bad things in their lives. And now he was dead.

Some strange things started to happen, though. First, some of the women went to the place where his body had been left, so he could have a proper burial, but the body was gone. One of them, Mary, said she saw him, and heard him talking to her, but nobody believed her. Then other people said they saw him,

touched him, and even had breakfast with him on the beach.

This was all very odd, but pretty soon people started to realize that they often were aware that Jesus – the Christ, the Saviour after all – was with them when they were eating together and telling stories and singing. And soon they began to make a connection between what Jesus had said about bread and wine and these strange goings-on. They began to realize that Jesus was most present to them when they shared a meal with one another, sang a few songs, and told each other the good news about their lives. They didn't really understand it, but they knew that something important was happening.

After a while, it wasn't just the folks who had known Jesus before he died, but lots of other people who had heard the stories about what Jesus had said and done started to feel his presence, too. The songs and the stories and the dinners that seemed to make him most real spread all over the world, and pretty soon huge crowds were gathering. It started to get impractical for everyone to sit down at the table together, so instead of a real dinner, people would just share a little bit of bread and wine – the things Jesus had mentioned – while they listened to the stories and the music.

By this time, too, the people who remembered Jesus – even if they had never met him before he died – were calling themselves "Christians," the people who follow Christ. And they called their gatherings "church," which comes from a word that means "those who are called." And every church told the stories about Jesus a little differently; they sang different tunes; and even though they all shared bread and wine, they all did that a little differently, as well. They used different names, too. Some of them called it Communion, some called it Eucharist, and some called it the Lord's Supper.

After years and years and years, the ceremonies surrounding the bread and wine got very complicated. Little by little, folks got intimidated by all the fancy costumes and expensive

cups and plates, and they started to think that Jesus was actually in the bread and the wine in some magical way, instead of among them in their sharing and singing and storytelling. The leaders made lots of rules about who could touch this special food, and how they had to prepare themselves.

So for a long, long time, instead of coming to church looking forward to meeting their friends and having a good time, people thought of church as kind of sad and solemn. Even though there was a Communion service every Sunday (or in some places, every day), most people just watched, because they thought that only the leaders were good enough to touch, let alone eat or drink, the Body and Blood of Christ. They had forgotten about sharing dinner with Jesus.

About 500 years ago, reformers like Luther and Calvin began to say that Jesus wasn't really in the bread and wine in the magical way that people were thinking. They didn't all agree on what was happening, but most of them said that we should go on sharing bread and wine because Jesus told us to. And although most of the reformers said that everyone should participate every Sunday, a lot of churches got into the habit of having Communion only once a month, or every few months, or even once a year. What started as something people did naturally when they got together, eating and drinking and having a good time remembering a very special person, became something serious and maybe even a little grim. People seemed to be remembering Jesus' death more than his life.

In the nineteenth century, a few scholars found some ancient descriptions of Communion, and thought about how it must have been in the early days, when it really was a celebration. The scholars talked about what they found, and by the mid-1970's, just about the time that Seekers got started, the ecumenical Liturgical Renewal movement was in full swing. In the last 25 years, just about every major denomination – Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist, and UCC – has

revised its Communion liturgy, some of them more than once. These new liturgies have a great deal in common. One of the important features is a sense of the service as an integral whole, from the opening hymn through the proclamation of the Word and the Eucharistic sharing to the closing benediction. Even more, there is a renewed emphasis on Eucharist – which means "thanksgiving" – as thanksgiving for all of creation, as Christ's banquet table.

Seekers' early liturgies benefited from all this energy, because Sonya was in the midst of it. She participated in ecumenical gatherings, talking and listening to a lot of people interested in liturgical renewal. And Sonya wrote a new liturgy for Seekers every week, with help from Mary Carol. As you can imagine, it must have gotten hard to come up with a new liturgy every single week. And there is something nice about knowing what to expect, at least some of the time. So after a while, some Seekers got together and wrote a Eucharist liturgy that would be used every month. I think David Lloyd was part of that group, and Sonya, of course, but I don't know who else.

About that time, too, or maybe a little after, Seekers began to be aware of the liturgical seasons that are so much a part of us now – Advent/Christmas/Epiphany, Lent/Easter/Pentecost, and the long season of Ordinary Time. Instead of a new liturgy every week, liturgies were used for an entire season. But in the short seasons, it didn't seem like a good idea to replace the seasonal prayers with the special ones of the full Eucharist service. Instead, just the last part of what had been a full, integrated service was used at the end of the seasonal liturgy on Communion Sundays.

This is how it's been for at least ten years. But recently, it started to bother some folks that the Eucharist liturgy seemed like an optional add-on, having no natural connection with the rest of the service. About a year ago Celebration Circle started to talk about writing a [new liturgy](#) in which the

entire service would be, once again, an integral whole. We dug into the history, the theology, our memories and our feelings. We talked with each other and with other members of the community. We argued, laughed, wrote, and talked some more. It's been the hardest work we have ever done together, and only by the grace of the Holy Spirit in our midst have we been able to bring it to the state in which you have been experiencing it today. Because there is value in tradition, in the prayers that we have heard and said so long that they are part of us, we tried to keep some of the language of the Eucharist service that many of us know by heart. In all of our work, we have tried to keep a balance between making the prayers fresh enough that we pay attention, and familiar enough that we can sink into them to the place beyond thinking.

This morning we have already told some stories and sung some songs. We have confessed our imperfections; given thanks for the gifts and graces that come our way; and asked for God's presence with those in need. We have anointed one another with blessings, and prayed as Jesus taught us. In a few moments, we will gather around Christ's banquet table, serving one another as Jesus served his friends. There is an old saying, that "you are what you eat." Seeing the face of God in one another's faces, let us celebrate that we are what we eat and drink together: the Body of Christ, the Cup of New Life.