

Deborah Sokolove: The True Presence

A Sermon for Seekers Church

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by Deborah Sokolove

The True Presence

This was supposed to be another in my occasional series on the connections between worship at Seekers and in the traditions and practices of Christian churches since the time of the apostles. About a year ago, I spoke about the [liturgical year](#), with its festal cycles of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and Lent-Easter-Pentecost separated by periods of what is usually referred to as Ordinary Time, and how that ordering of time helps us to live into the Gospel. [In October](#), on Recommitment Sunday, I asked us to consider exactly what we were recommitting to by examining the elements and structure of our own Sunday worship. Today, I wanted to take a look at our Communion practice as a way of opening a conversation about what we think we are doing when we share the cup and the bread. I wanted to talk about the meaning of the terms Communion, Eucharist, and Lord's Supper, to consider the theological implications of each term as well as of our peculiar style of celebration. And I wanted to respond to Margreta's question of some weeks ago, when she asked why we change the rest of the liturgical texts regularly, but have been saying the same words every month at Communion for at least nine years, and probably longer.

However, two things have gotten in the way of my intentions. The first is this week's lectionary. [The Gospel reading](#) we just heard is so familiar that we might not be able to hear its compelling insistence that our human reasoning about

security, power, and authority is useless in God's eyes. To use Paul's words from First Corinthians (also in this week's readings), *"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ... Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles ... The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."* Jesus, and Paul after him, calls us to turn our plans, our ideas, and our lives upside down.

Unlike the Beatitudes or First Corinthians, the book of Micah is probably not very familiar to most of us. It tells no stories, has no memorable character. Micah himself is shadowy, not figuring in any of the great ancestral dramas that form our unconscious image of the Hebrew Scriptures. But the short book attributed to this 8th century BCE prophet, a rural contemporary of his better-known urban colleague Isaiah, contains three passages that are familiar to most. The first (4:3), we heard set to music last week during the: *They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.* The second (5:2) is quoted in Matthew (2:6) as a proof text concerning the birth of Jesus. When the Magi ask in Jerusalem where the new king is to be born, they are told of the prophecy: *"But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."* And the third (8:6) ends today's reading. When I memorized it as a child, it went *"And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."*

The most obvious difference between the current translation and the one I remember is the difference between "mercy" and "kindness." When *mercy* is paired with *justice*, as it is here, there is a sense of unequal power relationships, of a judge who punishes the guilty with restraint, but punishes

nonetheless. *Kindness* has a more egalitarian connotation – it is a quality of gentleness that may be extended equally to the powerless and the powerful. However, neither *mercy* nor *kindness* fully captures the sense of the Hebrew word, *hesed*, which is variously translated in other places as *steadfast love*, *goodness*, *loyalty*, *righteousness*, or *devotion*. These words, taken together, give an image of what it means to be a person of God, a person who is not merely kind in the sense of polite and mannerly, but actively engaged in right action.

For Micah, as for most of the prophets, a call for justice was not the voice of the establishment advocating stricter laws and harsher punishment for criminals, but rather the voice of the powerless insisting that food, clothing and shelter are the rights of all, not merely the privileges of the wealthy. Micah says "*Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds ... You strip the robe from the peaceful, from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war. The women of my people you drive out from their pleasant houses: from their young children you take away my glory forever.*" When he prophesies destruction, it is against oppressors, not against those who are turned into criminals by poverty and unjust laws. Micah reminded his people, as he reminds us, that God is not concerned with particular forms of religious observance, but is very interested in how we treat one another, especially those who have nothing.

My second distraction from a discussion about Eucharist was Jackie's sermon last week, in which she spoke of the insistent call of her hidden ancestors. As most of you know, I have recurrent bouts of re-examining my relationship with my own, not so hidden, Jewish ancestors, not to mention my living Jewish relatives. As I've often said, the more seriously I take Christianity, the more seriously I must also take the Jewish claims and understandings about God. And so I wonder, from time to time, for what purpose God has called me out of my Jewish past, to follow Christ on this astonishing journey.

Last week, I had a little glimpse of what may be the answer. It has to do with making connections, bridging gaps, making peace. Some weeks ago, as Glen was preparing for his School of Christian Living course on music, he asked me about the sources of Hebraic chant, and when I didn't know, he asked Steve Marcus. In our house, it is a truism that any question with the word "Jewish" in it has a very long answer, and this time was no exception. So Steve, happy to have an excuse to investigate, has been flooding Glen with articles, as well as a teaching tape for learning the tunes of the traditional Sabbath liturgy. Last Saturday afternoon, Glen asked me about some detail, and in an effort to answer him I got out an old prayer book to provide translation as we listened to the tape. I, of course, was instantly transported to those uncountable times when I would stand next to my father in the synagogue, trying to follow along as he chanted the incomprehensible words that now, amazingly, I understand. Glen, burdened with no such memories or understandings, exclaimed, "It's just like the Catholic Mass!" And so it is. Except for the references to Jesus, of course, the Jewish order of worship is filled with the same kinds of praise and petition and thanksgiving as you might find in any liturgical church: a set order of prayers that ends with a blessing over the wine.

Blessing over the wine? Doesn't that sound like Communion? What's that doing in a Jewish service? They don't have Communion, do they? What it's doing there is what Jewish people, like Christians, have always done, whether in small, intimate gatherings like Jesus eating with the disciples, or public events like synagogue worship. Wine and bread are blessed, and people eat.

One traditional understanding of Communion is that it is a little bit of the heavenly banquet, the holy feast of God, at which all are welcome. In the Jewish practice of my childhood, every Friday night service ended with the rabbi and cantor leading a singing, jostling procession into the social hall,

where a large, braided challah was blessed and broken and passed around. Here awaited a true feast of not only of bread and wine, but also of coffee and tea and enormous mounds of cookies. It certainly looked and tasted like heaven to us kids, and I think to the adults, too, who stood around in noisy clumps, not unlike Seekers at coffee hour.

Well, I seem to be talking about Communion after all. I don't want to get into a technical discussion of whether the Christian Eucharist derives from Jewish public worship or mealtime blessings, although that is a hot topic in some liturgical studies circles. I am more interested in what we do and mean today. *Communion* is the word we use at Seekers, at least on the bulletin inserts for our time of sharing the bread and the cup. The word comes from the same root as "community" and conveys a sense of shared understanding, of communication both with our fellow Christians and with God.

The word more commonly used in ecumenical settings is Eucharist. *Eucharist* simply means "thanksgiving," and in many churches the relatively long Eucharistic prayer is also known as the Great Thanksgiving. Beginning with God's act of Creation, this prayer is a review of sacred history, with emphasis on God's saving acts in such stories as the Flood and the Exodus as well as in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This ends with a petition to the Holy Spirit "*that this bread and wine may become for us the body and blood of Christ.*"

Defining the meaning of this petition has historically caused a great deal of trouble. During the Middle Ages, scholars began to question exactly how Christ became present in the bread and wine. Having what may seem to us a rather literalist turn of mind, they asked how it were possible that Christ could be simultaneously at the right hand of God and on each altar where Communion was celebrated. Terms such as "consubstantiation" and "transubstantiation" became fighting words between the Roman Catholic establishment and the

sixteenth century reformers, each a code word for a precisely defined relationship between earthly food and drink and sacred meal. Eventually, the Roman authorities proclaimed the dogma of the True Presence of Christ in the Communion elements, while the more radical reformers said that the bread and wine were simply a kind of memory-aid for thinking about Jesus, and called it the "Lord's Supper."

Other questions that occupied Medieval scholars was discerning the precise moment when the elements became Christ's presence, and what exact words were needed to effect this transformation. On this, strangely enough, the Roman Church and the Reformers agreed – the "magic words" were "This is my body ... This is my blood." Although most of the Reformation churches rejected the notion of sacraments in general and the True Presence in particular, they retained what is often called "the Institution Narrative" as the biblical warrant, and necessary words, for continuing to observe what they now called "the Lord's Supper."

Recent ecumenical dialogue has rejected most of the arguments that so greatly divided the major denominations, in favor of an entirely new understanding. Today, most Catholic and Protestant liturgical theologians agree that Christ's True Presence rests primarily in the worshiping assembly, in the public, communal participation in the entire liturgy. There are no magic words, no special moment, simply the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the elements **and** on the living members of the body of Christ who eat and drink together.

Most liturgical theologians these days also point out that Eucharist was the most important part of the worship of the early church, and it is a kind of historical accident that it is celebrated only quarterly or monthly in many Protestant churches. This has to do with, among other things, a belief among many that one must be "worthy" in order to participate. Countering the mournful attitude that equates the Lord's Supper with the Last Supper is a new stress on the many meals

Jesus shared with his friends and disciples, and an understanding that it is in the Eucharist that we learn what it means to follow Christ. If that is so, my teachers and colleagues argue, then the norm should be Eucharist every Sunday.

And now I've come back to the questions with which I began. What do we think we are doing in that relatively brief time on the first Sunday of each month, as we stand in a circle and say of the bread, "The body of Christ" and of the cup, "The cup of the new covenant"? In fact, what **do** we say as we pass the cup? Some of us use the ancient formula "the blood of Christ." Others say, "the cup of salvation." And some add to any of them "poured out for you." Should we all simply repeat what is said to us, or vary it in accordance with our own conscience, our own belief?

What about the other words, the Communion liturgy that Margreta suggested was getting a little stale? What does it mean to you? Is it boring after long use, or a comforting place of stability amid a constantly changing worship environment?

What about the elements? Do the bread and wine become something special once the community has invoked the Holy Spirit and repeated Jesus' words, or do they remain as they were, earthly food and drink? Is the True Presence of Christ more present on Communion Sunday than in any other gathering for worship?

And what about our own selves? Does Communion matter to us? If it is true that we are what we eat, are we changed when we have eaten the bread of heaven, the body of Christ? A lot of my recent reading about liturgy makes a strong connection between the joyful celebration of Communion and the practice of the kind of social justice that Micah and the other prophets taught. Emphasizing the continuities between prophetic Jewish thought and the teachings of Jesus, they

point out that Jesus poured out his life on behalf of the poor and the powerless, the outcasts of society. If our sharing in the Lord's Supper is a sharing in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, then our natural response to such sharing will be to pour out our own lives for the healing of our broken, hurting world. We become one with Christ in the act of eating and drinking, of offering food and drink. As we say "amen" – "I believe it" – to the offering of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and cup, we become the living, breathing, acting body and blood of Christ in the world.