

Know the Eucharist

Food has a special place in every culture. Human communities devote great energy and enterprise to the production of food.

When crops fail our lives are placed in jeopardy. Hunger and starvation continue to be known in different parts of the world.

Dining together satisfies a number of needs: for physical sustenance, for company, extending hospitality and for celebration.

It is not surprising that food has become a basic symbol in our spiritual lives. Each of us has within us a deep spiritual hunger.

Just as the body needs food to stay alive and healthy, so our spirits long to be nourished on food that promotes our spiritual growth.

We are characterized by spiritual hungers and thirsts for meaning, for direction, for a vision to live by, and ultimately for God. It is the Eucharist that recognizes these human appetites.

Hebraic Background

In Egypt the Hebrews became slaves. They were treated harshly. They longed for freedom. In their suffering they cried out. God heard their cries and delivered them from captivity.

The Passover meal celebrates the liberation that God made possible. When they wandered in the desert, God provided manna sufficient for the day. These memories of God's gener-

ous provision and celebration of liberation were taken into the Eucharist by the early church.

Jesus' table fellowship

The gospels tell us of Jesus sharing meals with many people. He ate with Pharisees who were respected: he ate with tax collectors who were despised. Jesus multiplied five loaves provided by a young boy to provide food for a large crowd. He shared food with women who were prostitutes. Such table fellowship was a powerful sign of God's grace.



The Last Supper

On the night before he was betrayed, Jesus gathered his disciples in the Upper Room. He said that the bread broken and the wine poured would be symbols of his life offered in service of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Later, the poetry of John's gospel would see Jesus himself as spiritual food for those devoted to his way.

Resurrection life

It is the faith of the church that God raised Jesus from the grave. He appeared to disciples soon after the resurrection. On some of these occasions the Risen Christ shared meals with them. It was held that 'he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.' The Spirit that was in Christ was now released and was available to all the peoples of the world.

The Early Church

The first followers of the Way of Jesus continued to think of themselves as being within the Jewish community. They worshipped in the Temple and in synagogues. On the first day of the week, Sunday, they gathered in homes for the breaking of the bread and the prayers. This practice was to evolve into the Eucharist as we know it.

The Parting of the Ways

For a variety of reasons, different interpretations of the scriptures, the nature of Jesus' messiahship and issues related to the inclusion of Gentiles, the church and synagogue went their own ways. The little Christian communities scattered around the Mediterranean felt themselves exposed in the Roman Empire. From time to time there were violent persecutions. On the Lord's day they often met in secret and in danger to tell the story of Jesus and celebrate the Eucharist.

Historical Evolution

Over the centuries the Eucharist evolved in different ways in various cultures. In the west it lost its meal dimension and became an individual communing with God. There were times when the Eucharist became the preserve of priests and the baptized scarcely participated. Often ritual obscured meaning and the death of Christ dominated.

Methodist Tradition

John Wesley stood in the Anglican tradition. The renewal of the church that he sought in eighteenth century Britain was both evangelical and sacramental. He preached the gospel to great crowds and administered Holy Communion to vast gatherings. Charles Wesley wrote 166 hymns for the Lord's Supper, which contain a sometimes forgotten eucharistic theology. Today the church is recovering the centrality of the Eucharist in its life. We might speak of Eucharist today under four headings.

God's Hospitality

At the heart of the breaking of the bread is God's generous hospitality. God's grace seeks to welcome all who will respond in trust and faith. God sets before us a table. As we are not in control, we may be surprised at those who accept the invitation. The heart of God is open and the Eucharist is the sign of this costly grace that is offered.

TRINITY METHODIST CHURCH
Street: 32 Clive Square East, Napier
Postal: P O Box 4088, Marewa, Napier 4143
Phone: 06-835 8163 Web: www.trinitynapier.org.nz

Subversive Memory

The Eucharist is the thanksgiving that the church offers for Jesus. The memory of Jesus is disturbing. His parables and healing, his actions and self-offering introduce us to a world of grace. Around the table we retell the story of Jesus. In this moment bread and wine are transformed: their meaning is intensified and they convey to the community of faith the presence of the crucified and risen one.

Food for the Journey

The sacramental meal we share nourishes our spirits on our journey to God's kingdom. Our hunger and thirst for righteousness is stimulated. We never travel alone. The church is a community of pilgrims called and empowered to be reconcilers and healers. Our eucharistic sharing makes us aware of the hungers of the world and provides us with a vision of a transformed economy.

Coming New Creation

Around the table, through powerful remembering and the action of the Spirit, we long for God's will to be done. We seek to enact justice: we express solidarity with the exploited. We find ourselves transformed into the Body of Christ and, through eager anticipation, experience the promise of God's New Creation.

This *Little Essay* by Terry Wall is made available within the Methodist Church by The Faith & Order Committee.

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Te Hahi Weteriana o Aotearoa

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'People will come from north and south, from east and west, to sit down at the banquet in the kingdom of God.' Happy are we to be called to this feast. Luke 13:29