

"Eat, Drink, And Be Christian"
Rev. Bill Freeman
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Menifee United Church of Christ

Introduction

Jeff Foxworthy

Jeff Foxworthy has made a career out of telling redneck jokes. For example, "You might be a redneck if...you go to your family reunion looking for a date." Or: "You might be a redneck if...you ever cut your grass and found a car." And: "You might be a redneck if...your congregation uses shot glasses for communion." I like that. Maybe we should try it. (Kidding!)

What is communion?

What is communion? What happens in communion? What does communion represent? Where did communion come from? As you probably know, Christians believe that Jesus instituted communion, or the Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper, at the Last Supper. Jesus shared food and drink with his disciples the night before he was crucified. In communion, we eat of the bread and we drink from the cup - in memory, in honor, and in kinship with Jesus. Some Christians celebrate communion every week - like Catholic and Episcopal churches. Other Christians celebrate communion once a month - like Methodist and United Church of Christ churches. And still other Christians don't celebrate communion at all - like many non-denominational churches. For Christians who do take part in communion, the bread represents the body of Christ, and the cup represents the blood of Christ. So, Christians are said to eat the body of Christ and to drink the blood of Christ. I guess you could say, the body of Christ nourishes, sustains, and energizes the body of Christ - the Church!

A Modern-Day Example

In sacraments class in seminary

In sacraments class in seminary, we learned about communion. (The other sacrament, for Protestants, is baptism.) We learned that Christians have three interpretations of communion, of what communion means. The first interpretation of communion is that the bread and the cup become the actual body and blood of Christ. The second interpretation of communion is that the bread and the cup represent the spiritual body and blood of Christ, present during the partaking of the elements. And the third interpretation of communion is that the bread and the cup represent a remembrance of the body and blood of Christ. I was hoping that the professor would tell us which interpretation is correct. No such luck.

I was confused

I was confused. We don't really eat Jesus' body and drink Jesus' blood during communion, do we? I mean, Christians aren't cannibals, right? Then about a week after our sacraments class ended, I was doing my own Bible reading, and I came across the Gospel of John, Chapter 6. Jesus was telling his disciples, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will have eternal life." But then the disciples were as confused as I was. I think they were also a bit squeamish about eating Jesus's body and drinking his blood. And that's when Jesus said to them, according to John 6:63, "It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life." So after reading that I went to our sacraments professor and said, "Look! Look what I came across in the Gospel of John! Jesus is saying we don't eat his body and drink his blood! It's all spiritual! It's all about his spirit and life! We eat of the bread of life and we drink from the cup of the spirit!" And she said, in a very non-committal way, "Well, isn't that interesting?"

A Biblical Example

The Psalmist came many years before communion

The Psalmist came many years before communion. And yet, the Psalmist – presumably King David – seems to understand why many Christians crave communion. For example, just like many communion-craving Christians, the Psalmist says of God, “my soul thirsts for you.” Just like many communion-craving Christians, the Psalmist says of God, “my soul is satisfied as with a rich feast.” And just like many communion-craving Christians, the Psalmist says of God, “My soul clings to you.”

We desire in communion

We desire in communion to consume the spirit and life of Jesus, so that they are a part of our spirit and life. The spirit and life of Jesus are his essence. They are what makes Jesus Jesus. They are what makes him who he is: the personification of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. And that’s why we eat and drink the communion elements. Because we want Jesus inside of us, spiritually speaking, so that we, too, can be the personification of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. Now, we may never get there completely. But just like a little food and a little drink to a starving and thirsty person are better than nothing at all, a little bit of Jesus’ spirit and life, a little bit of the Truth, Beauty, and Goodness that make up Jesus, are better than nothing at all.

Another Biblical Example

The apostle Paul embraces communion

The apostle Paul embraces communion. In First Corinthians (which some presidential candidates might call One Corinthians), he attempts to connect Christianity with Judaism. How can that be? Well, Paul proclaims that we, “all ate the same spiritual food.” Paul proclaims that we, “all drank the same spiritual drink.” And Paul proclaims that back in ancient times Jews, “drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.” And apparently seeing a connection between Christian bread and Jewish bread, Paul proclaims, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

What is Paul saying exactly?

What is Paul saying exactly? Well, I believe he’s saying something that I’m not sure that all Christians would agree with, and I seriously doubt that many Jews would agree with it either. But I like it. And because this is a United Church of Christ church, you can decide for yourself whether you like it. What Paul is saying - I believe - is this: God loves all of us - Christians and Jews. God gives all of us spiritual food and spiritual drink to nourish us, to sustain us, and to energize us - Christians and Jews. Therefore, we are all one - Christians and Jews. What do you think? I would go even further and say we are all one – Christians and Jews, Buddhists and Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and everyone else. Because I believe God loves all of us. But, as I say, you can decide that for yourself. You should know, though, that that’s why I announce on Communion Sunday, “All are welcome to take part in this communion, because Jesus never turned anyone away.” In other words, like the Apostle Paul, I believe, “we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

A Contemporary Christian Comment

Thomas Merton offers us insight

Thomas Merton offers us insight into communion. Thomas Merton, the late Catholic monk and Christian mystic, declares, “The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless...beyond

speech...beyond concept." It's like an old married couple sitting in their living room a few feet apart. They may not be saying anything to each other. But they're sharing a place and time together. It too is wordless...beyond speech...beyond concept. It's less like communication and more like communion.

Communion is soul food

Communion is soul food for Christians. Our soul thirsts for God and our spirit hungers for Jesus, even more than our body thirsts for water and our belly hungers for food. The bread satisfies our soul and the cup quenches our spirit. As Jesus told the devil in the wilderness: we do not live by bread alone. But our soul, our spirit, does need nourishment, does need sustenance, and does need energy to make it from here to eternity. That's why we come here for communion the first Sunday of the month. Not because a little piece of bread or a wafer and some juice in a cup smaller than a shot glass, representing the body and blood of Jesus, give us physical nourishment, physical sustenance, and physical energy. But because a little piece of bread or a wafer and some juice in a cup smaller than a shot glass, representing the spirit and life of Jesus, give us spiritual nourishment, spiritual sustenance and spiritual energy.

Conclusion

Communion can take many forms

Communion can take many forms. Some churches, to attract young people, gather once a week at a bar, engaging folks in deep theological discussions, over a beer and maybe some chips. I would suggest that they are all partaking in communion, and that the chips and the beer that they share represent the bread and the wine that Jesus shared with his disciples. It's like on Saturday mornings, when I make myself available to this congregation and to the community by hanging out at Jacky's Donut Hut. Granted the communion elements I partake in are not bread and wine, they're a blueberry muffin and some milk. But they are, for me, on that day, the body and blood of Christ, the spirit and life of Jesus. I'm there to do the work of Jesus. I'm there to be the body of Christ - the Church - to others. And I'm there for those who need a listening ear or a supportive hug.

Our church's shut-ins

Our church's shut-ins, church members who can't make it here on communion Sunday or any other Sunday, still take part in communion. Kathleen and I bring the bread and the cup to them once a month. We enjoy sharing the communion elements with these long-time members of our church. We feel that they enjoy it too. We feel that it brings us closer together. And we feel that communion makes them a part of this community. When you think about it, communion is a symbol, a powerful symbol, that represents - or re-presents - Jesus to the world. I hope that when you and I take part in communion, when we feast on the spirit and life of Jesus, that they give us the spiritual nourishment that we need, that they give us the spiritual sustenance that we need, and that they give us the spiritual energy that we need, to offer the spirit and life of Jesus to everyone we meet from now until forever.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray...

God of Love,
Help us to be nourished by communion.
Help us to be sustained by communion.
And help us to be energized by communion.
Now and forevermore.
By the power of the Holy Spirit.

And in the name of Jesus.
Amen.