

ARE YOU READY TO TAKE COMMUNION?

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It seems to me that whenever we do anything with any regularity –perhaps weekly – monthly – it is very easy for us to get into routine – so that we lose sight of the original purpose – we can easily find ourselves going through the motions - so sometimes we need to stop and say WHY – why do we do this – what does this mean?

Once a month here at Central – we share in what we call communion. Here we share with millions of Christians who come to this table and do this. Different formats – different names for it; 4 names

Communion

Lord's supper

Breaking of Bread – brethren chapels

Eucharist – from Greek word = to be thankful -

We slow down for a few minutes to answer this morning – what is communion and what does it mean to take this bread and wine -- many ways we could develop and expand what it means – this is just a very tiny slice in that.

3 words that will help us be ready to take communion this morning.

RETROSPECTIVE - every time we come to this table – we have to look back.

Let me take you back a long long time ago – some 3500 or so years – we are in the land of Egypt – a people who will later become known as the Israelites are slaves – their leader Moses - has pleaded to Pharaoh for their freedom – he has cried – pleaded - **let my people go** – but the answer is no. Get back to work! And the whips are cracked even harder.

Days are long and hot – the work gets harder – and then in what is nothing less than a divine intervention that will actually shape them as a nation – God tells them how in the events of one night – they will be set free.

They are told to take a lamb – mark the doorposts of their homes with the blood of that lamb – and as the angel of death passes over the land – under cover of darkness they can make their escape.

Can you imagine as the word spreads – perhaps the Egyptians hear rumours that something is going on that night – but they don't know what – the Israelite families prepare for this night – unleavened bread – they are to eat this special supper ready to travel – have their cloaks on – shoes on their feet – staff in their hand -- they have to be ready to go.

So the days work comes to an end - Darkness falls – they huddle in their homes – doors are closed – the supper begins – fathers – their hands stained with blood of a freshly killed lamb – they mark the doors of their homes – they are quiet – then all across the land they hear the wails of grief that come from Egyptian homes – their first born start to die.

Under the cover of desert darkness — and a long line of people slowly and cautiously start to open their doors – peek out – looking one way and the other – and nervously step outside. Slowly a long

line begins to form – hundreds and then thousands - They head out into the night – for the first time - they can taste freedom in the warm air – all that lies ahead of them is unknown – but that's another story for another time.

This event is to be called Passover.

The entire success of this mission all hangs on one thing -- this red stain on their doors – if this does not work – if this fails – then the Egyptians will be down on them harder than anything – the pressure will be unbearable.

Fast forward hundreds of years – it is another evening – now we are in the city of Jerusalem – if I was a philanthropist – and had lots of money - tell you to go home and get your passports - take you there today – take you to Jerusalem – up to Galilee – sermon on the Mount – down to Qumran - where the Dead Sea were found – it would change your life.

But we join Jesus and this group of men 2,000 years ago - This annual Passover is being remembered all through the land – families gather – relatives come together – kids play with cousins they have not seen since the last Passover -- Homes are cleaned – there is a family game to be played – parents hide a piece of leaven in the house – children have to find it as a way of remembering that the old leaven has to be gone – and the new bread has come.

– lambs are slain – it is bloody and messy and loud as dying lambs bleat – children cry - and now the supper is ready.

It becomes quiet – children are hushed – the youngest child is coached to ask -- **– why is this night different from every other night** – and the grandfather tells the story of a night that gave them freedom. IT is a story that is deeply etched into their history – it is story that forged them as a people.

This is the kind of gathering Jesus is sharing with some friends just before he goes to the cross.

Catch the irony – all across the city these family gatherings are celebrating the lamb that was slain – the freedom that was given – and in the midst of that – but the real – the true lamb of God is about to be slain to bring real freedom – and they miss the point – they don't get it!

Nestled within that great story of freedom – within that chronicle of redemption – that cosmic narrative of salvation is your story and mine.

Look back – and remember all of that.

Communion must also be **INTROSPECTIVE** - this means – it makes us look within ourselves - right now – what is going on. We need to ask – perhaps we need to ask -- are there times and occasions when I am not ready to take this bread and wine.

The passage we often read at communion says to us – let a man/person examine themselves.

2 questions we need to ask ourselves --

1st question:

– have I personally responded to the love of God in Christ and know who Jesus is as saviour and Lord.

You may not be able to put a time and date on when that happened – but today you know that it is real and true for you. I became a Christian when I was about 16 in a Baptist church in Glasgow Scotland where I grew up - – was baptised. First time I took communion was night of my baptism – we hurriedly got changed and with wet hair sat in front row of the church.

Perhaps you are on the journey to become a Christian – in a few moments you might want just to pray --- when we take this bread and wine – we are saying– I believe – we believe ---- and you might add to that -- Today I believe. Then come and let us know.

2nd question:

– how are my relationships with people – here and now – are they OK. Or am I holding on to some stuff – some anger – some resentment.

Story about Jim and Francis – asked Jim who was a deacon to pray for communion – he stood up and said NO – then he said – my wife and I had an argument on way down to church and we have not cleared it up yet! And he sat down.

Jesus says to us – Matthew 5 (The message)

23-24" This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God.

We can do a lot of things when we are angry – we can cut the grass – we can wash the dishes – someone asks - is anything wrong – we say NO! - but when we are angry -- we cannot truly enter into worship – sure we can go through the motions – many of us have been in church long enough that we can do that – to be blunt - we know how to fake it – we can come and take bread/wine – but let's be honest – we know that it is just external.

God is always interested in our heart – what's going on in the inside.

David – Psalm 139 –

We may be familiar with the words – search me O God and know my heart – here's it in The Message

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**Investigate my life, O God,
find out everything about me;
Cross-examine and test me,
get a clear picture of what I'm about;
See for yourself whether I've done anything wrong—
then guide me on the road to eternal life.**

It is as simple as this – in a moment when we come to take communion – quietly ask yourself – am I holding on to anything - perhaps I have for a while – am I angry with someone here at Central Baptist – or in my family –

A story – some of you have asked what we have been doing -- for the past 6 years or so – I have been involved in being an interim pastor at various churches – often for about a year as I was here at Central – going to a church that is without a pastor – providing stability and continuity.

When I go a new church – I usually ask if there has been any issues – anything going on I should know about. One church – had let their pastor go – not everyone agreed with the board over that and there had been some resentment from a small group of people. This group still came to church – but had withdrawn their support. How they expressed that was like this --

At communion – when people came forward which was their practice – they sat in a group – and did not move – did not get up. It made a silent but visible protest. So I saw this happen over several communion services each month.

One Sunday – a communion Sunday – I had thought to myself – this is not acceptable – this cannot continue. So as I was talking about how we prepare to come to communion I decided to take a risk – after all what can they do – fire me?

I decided to speak into this situation – and it got quiet – very quiet. I said that when such things happen in our society – we usually just say – Oh get over it. That's our answer. Just get over it.

But that's not the word that Scripture calls for – Scripture does not tell us to get over it – Scripture tells us **to lay it down**. That's different.

So we started into communion – elders stood at the front to serve the people - and one by one this group got up – I wondered if they were leaving – But they started to come forward to receive communion from the elders they had resisted. They came to lay it down. There were some tears – some hugs. It broke something open in the life of that church.

Our usual answer is – just get over it. I suggest that does not usually work -- and that is not the way of the Bible – the Bible does not say to us – get over it – rather it invites us to lay it down – to lay some anger – some resentment – some bitterness down – and lay it down at the foot of the cross.

The cross is the place of freedom – it is also the place of reconciliation. We could and must say so much more about that – but that will have to be at another time.

Where do you have to pause and look inward this morning? Is there anything you have to lay down at the foot of the cross?

Pause -

Third movement – communion is PRESPECTIVE – that means - it invites us to look forward – to look ahead.

The communion passage we often read says – **we do this until he comes**.

The first Passover was shared by people who had their cloaks on – staff in their hands – sandals on their feet – staff in hands - and ready to move on.

Let me give you one word to describe what this is – word is **HOPE**.

Our problem is that in English – hope tends to be a weak word – we hope that the weather will be nice – but we have no control over it – in the Bible hope is not a weak word – it is a word that shouts confidence – it proclaims assurance – it declares certainty.

Taken many funerals in 49 years – buried my father – mother – a daughter-in-law -- often read as we stand with family around a grave

we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of those who have no hope.

It is OK to grieve – nothing wrong with that – it is healthy to grieve -- when I have buried babies - I cry - but our tears are mingled with hope. I buried my daughter-in-law – lovely young wife and mother -- and I cried.

Remember that the Israelites put all their hope for freedom and escape in a blood-stained mark on their doorposts – they did not know what lay ahead of them – so when we stand around a graveside – and lower a casket into the ground – we also place all of our hope on the blood of Jesus that was spilt on the cross.

The most important thing we need for daily life is hope – people in the downtown eastside in Vancouver – no hope in their eyes.

Bible says - Hope is the anchor of the soul – Thessalonians

Did not understand that verse for a long time - an anchor gives us stability – but I always thought – an anchor gives stability by holding a boat back – Hope does not hold us back -- here's a different idea –

In time of Roman galleys and later sailing ships – hard for sailing ships to navigate or manoeuvre into a narrow channel or harbour – so this is what they did – some sailors would take the anchor in a small boat – go out ahead of the sailing ship or galley – perhaps into a narrow channel where they wanted to go – drop the anchor ahead of the boat – and then they would pull themselves forward on the cable – being drawn towards the anchor. It was not behind them – but ahead of them. They would do this a number of times.

This was known as **kedging**.

Hope is not behind us slowing us down – hope is ahead of us – and as we pull on it – hope pulls us forward.

Even more than needing our daily bread – Or for some – their daily coffee! -- we need our daily hope .

Hope is the confidence that the empty grave is more powerful than death – it is the guarantee that the resurrection is stronger than crucifixion – it is the assurance that the future is more powerful than the past – It is the pledge that hope is stronger than memories.

So in these next few minutes – we cannot simply go through the motions – God is not interested in the externals – he is always more interested in our heart – where our heart is.

Can you look back – perhaps way back – with gratitude for God's story – and find your place in it –

Let me ask you – have you been baptised as you follow Jesus?

Can you look inside yourself – and say - search me O God – scrutinize my life – is there something you have to lay down at the foot of the cross?

Can you take hold of hope and pull yourself forward on it?

As you leave the sanctuary - – look above each door -- you will see a red cross over each door – you go out into our world with all its temptations and stresses – you go out under the safety of the blood of the Lamb.