

Do This...



William H. Willimon

The Christian faith is proved in its performance. This faith is not so much a set of beliefs or propositions, but a way of life, something we do, a way we walk, a set of embodied practices. A Christian is someone who not only talks like Jesus but also walks like Jesus.

And eats like Jesus, that especially.

How typical of Jesus to culminate his earthly ministry with a meal alongside friends. There, he did not say “believe this,” but “do this,” promising that, as often as we eat or drink this meal in the future, he’ll be with us.

This Holy Mystery gives us an opportunity to renew our Wesleyan commitment to eat and drink with Jesus, to commune with him and one another at the table. While This Holy Mystery gives wonderful theological rationale for more frequent communion in our church, the most important thing is for us to “do this.” The way to Eucharistic renewal is for more robust, more frequent, more lively celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

To that end I have asked congregations where I visit always to allow me to celebrate Communion with them. I thereby attempt to model sacramental leadership and to enable them to experience the unique, promised presence of Christ in this meal. I also am desperate to be regarded as a pastoral leader, not a mere CEO or ecclesiastical administrator. The Council of Bishops has embraced this as a

Methodists who have, despite our roots, neglected the sacraments,” I told him. “What should I do to excite future pastors about their sacramental leadership?”

He replied, “I would teach cooking classes.”

What?

“Until they experience the joy of setting a good table, they’ll never know what Jesus was doing in the Upper Room,” he explained. “And I would also teach bartending.”

“But we’re Methodists!” I countered.

“Pity,” he replied. “Perhaps Jesus was wrong, but I think until they learn to mix a good drink, they aren’t going to get vast portions of the Gospel of John. What happens to people when they get a bit

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means of teaching This Holy Mystery, resolving to celebrate Holy Communion as frequently as possible in our churches. We teach best by demonstration and invitation.

When I began my scholarly career, upon being invited to teach worship at a United Methodist seminary, I visited a renowned Catholic liturgical scholar at Yale. “I’ve got to teach liturgics to

tipsy?” he asked.

“Depends on the people,” I replied.

“Right!” he exclaimed. “Some people get aggressive and want to fight everybody in the bar, others get mellow and want to put their arms around everybody and sing, still others get sentimental and tell sad stories. What else do you want to happen on a Sunday?”

His instruction led me to a Eucharistic principle: How you do Communion makes all the difference. The food at a fast-food joint or a fancy French restaurant may be equally nutritious, but the experience is totally different. One makes you feel like a cow moving through a feed trough, and the other makes you feel like an honored human being. It's all in how you do it.

"I've never seen anybody do Communion that way before," remarked our new organist in my little church. "You do it as if you believe it. As if you expect something to happen," she said. I took this as high compliment and also as instruction on good liturgical leadership.

To that end I have my top ten suggestions for how to move toward more faithful Communion:

1. Look for ways to provide warmth and an experience of hospitality at the table. Fire the ushers if you have to. Keep pastoral direction to a minimum. I'm serious. We tend to make our observances of the Lord's Supper overly formal, rigid, and cold. That's not the way we Wesleyans worship. You are inviting people to a meal, not to close-order military drill. A simple, gracious, hospitable, "Come to the Table!" is sufficient direction.

2. Invite the congregation to sing hymns during the Communion. This isn't a funeral! It's a celebration of the presence of Christ with his people in the resurrection. I learned this from African American congregations with whom I have worshiped. Let them sing upbeat, familiar, beloved hymns (this is NOT the time for the organ to play softly and mournfully) as people come forward to receive the bread and wine, and you can totally transform their experience of Communion.

3. Use bread that looks like bread, preferably baked by members of the congregation, and in quantities that speak of grace, generosity, and the joy of a banquet.

4. Allow folks to receive the bread and wine standing up, eyes open, hands outstretched (this is an Easter meal, not a penitential funeral), but encourage them to remain and kneel at the altar rail for prayer while others commune. This gives flexibility and freedom to experience different modes of prayer and praise.

5. Use the services in *The Book of Worship*, which, though theologically well formed, encourage lots of variety and flexibility. If your congregation is unaccustomed to reading the service out of a

book, then simply bid the service through, without getting them bogged down in pages of read prayers and print. Remember, Holy Communion is something deeper than words, something that is done, more than something said, something to be seen and experienced.

6. Celebrate more frequently! Holy Communion is the normal food of Christians. Churches that celebrate this sacrament more frequently value it more highly.

7. In congregations where the length of a service is a major concern, do whatever is necessary to keep the service within the congregation's normal time frame. So often, the things that take time in celebrating Communion are a matter of poor planning or allowing nonessentials to crowd out essentials.

8. Use lay servers, trained by the pastor, who can make the holy act of handing bread to people be all that it is intended to be. Look them in the eyes, call their names if you know them, make it personal and intense.

9. Lead the service robustly, with expectancy, and conviction. If you are uncomfortable or inexperienced in serving as a host at Table, then practice until you perform this act of ministry with confidence.

10. Preach a full, recognizable sermon—no need for flaccid, abbreviated "Communion Meditations." Word and Table, the preached word at the pulpit and the enacted word at the Table, belong together.

Enjoy the presence of Christ! He has promised that, where just two or three of us gather, he'll be there. Give thanks that, among all the gifts that Christ has given us, he so generously gave us his body and his blood.

Do this! □

William H. Willimon is bishop of the North Alabama Annual Conference. His most recent book is *Conversations with Barth on Preaching* (Abingdon Press, 2006). See page 19 to order.



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