

THOMAS W. PORTER JR.

CONFLICT AND HOLY COMMUNION



How might Holy Communion provide the place, the time, the ritual and the spiritual power for transforming our conflicts, healing our relationships and doing the work of reconciliation in the world? How might a renewed understanding of the Last Supper and of the principles of conflict transformation guide us in our practice of reconciliation at the table of Holy Communion?

As a trial lawyer, minister, and chancellor for twenty-three years for my annual conference, I became aware of the problems with the adversarial retributive model for dealing with conflict. What I discovered is familiar to all of us, as I experienced this not only in the courtroom but also in our churches and in our communities. In fact, I began to see the adversarial retributive system of our courtrooms as the framework for most of our practices in dealing with conflict and harm in this world. I have spent the last decade in search of a better way—a more constructive way—of dealing with conflict and a way of living out our calling to be ministers of reconciliation. (2 Cor 5:17-19)

This journey has taken me from the courtroom to tables of conversation, dialogue, and mediation. Here I learned that resolving conflict has to do with relationships and working toward restructuring relationships, with the participants empowered to transform their own problems and conflicts. A significant part of the journey was in South Africa studying the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Here an

understanding of the Body of Christ came alive through an understanding of *ubuntu*: we are who we are because of our relationships; when I dehumanize you, I dehumanize myself; we are interconnected and interdependent. I saw the power of the telling and hearing of stories. I witnessed the essential practice of forgiveness. I also discovered a new understanding of justice, restorative justice, which moves us from a narrow focus on imposing punishment on offenders to bringing together victims and offenders to address the harm to victims through real accountability as well as to address the need for healing for victims, offenders, and communities. The most recent part of the journey has been with JUSTPEACE Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation of the United Methodist Church, helping to develop the theology, theory and practice of faith-based conflict transformation. (See www.JUSTPEACEumc.org) Among the lessons from working with the church has been the power of the circle process, which involves the creation of sacred space through ritual, the creation together of relational covenants to guide how we treat each other, the use of a talking piece to give everyone voice and promote good speaking and good listening, and a circle of collective wisdom where everyone is equally responsible for the outcome.

Early on I recognized the importance of getting people to a table where they could engage each other and work together to address the issues, the harm, and the problems that divided them. What happened to me on this journey was that the table to which I was drawn was the Table of Holy Communion. On this journey, I have developed a growing conviction that it is at the Table of Holy Communion that we will find the place, the time, the ritual and the spiritual power for transforming our conflicts, healing relationships, and doing the work of reconciliation in this world.

The reasons for this conviction are evident in the liturgy itself. We see that the liturgy of Holy Communion opens us up to the One who reconciles and heals. The invitation is to those who “seek to live in peace with one another.” The message is

of God’s forgiveness and steadfast love in spite of our failure to love God and neighbor. We are asked to “offer one another signs of reconciliation and love.” Through the Great Thanksgiving we enter into God’s salvation history of formation in God’s image, liberation, and reconciliation—in order to be “one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.” Finally, we are dismissed to “Go forth in peace.” Ritual is about spiritual formation. What might we be for this world if we took this liturgy seriously and allowed ourselves to be formed into people who share the word of reconciliation and practice the ministry of reconciliation?

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No one at this Table is unaware of the destructive conflicts in our world, in our communities, in the workplace, and in our homes. We bring all these conflicted worlds to the Table. The greatest issue of our day is how we are going to break out of the cycles of retribution and violence that are tearing apart our world and our relationships. At the Table of Holy Communion, each time we commune, we are reminded that the only way out of these cycles is through the path of forgiveness. We celebrate the defeat of the powers of retribution and violence through the Word of Forgiveness from the Cross and through the Resurrection. Here we finally are freed to give up the idolatry that violence is redemptive, that it will save us. What transformation might we offer the world from the Table if we led our communities on the path of forgiveness?

Most of us at the Table are not oblivious to the deep conflicts in our churches.

In our church we find great divisions on a variety of issues to the point where some even talk of schism. One of the toughest problems in the work of conflict transformation is how to get people to the table who disagree. At the Table of Holy Communion, we all find ourselves standing together, regardless of our differences. I have a growing conviction that on some issues we are not, at least in the near term, going to find common ground, but we can find at the Table higher ground, transcendent ground where we are invited to and can stand together. What would the Body of Christ look like for the world if we began to celebrate this gift and this reality?

The most important lesson for me about the Table has come through studying what Jesus did at the Last Supper, the meal we are called to remember. This has led to the conviction that the Table will only become transforming and formative for us and for the world when we begin to recognize, with Jesus, that the Table is a place to name and engage our conflicts and practice reconciliation.

We know that the Last Supper is related in some way to Passover and the remembrance of slavery and exodus from Egypt. Significant conflict! We also know that this supper takes place in Jerusalem. Jesus knows that there are religious and political forces in Jerusalem that want to kill him. He does not head for the hills, nor does he join the Zealots to fight. In fact, he courageously enters the eye of the storm on a donkey.

The first thing that Jesus does at the Last Supper is name the conflicts in the room. He names the elephant in the room when he says, “One of you is going to betray me, one who is eating with me.” He also names the whole conflictual system of his day by moving from the head of the table to the foot of the table and washing everyone’s feet. Finally, he notes that the rest of the disciples will desert him. The naming is important. Justice requires the naming. Truth requires the naming. As importantly, transformation requires the naming. The naming also helps us see the significance of the bread and wine. In the naming, we begin to see our need. We experience our hunger. We feel our thirst. We know we need God and each other. We need to be reconciled and to be a reconciler.

What Jesus does next is remarkable, radical and transforming in the context of his day and ours. He does not give a stone, or retribution or punishment. He gives bread and wine to Judas, to Peter, to everyone. Here Jesus reframed the reality of our world. Reality is not about retributive justice, but restorative justice. This act of giving bread and wine is the symbolic act of forgiveness written deep in the Last Supper.

We are called to do the same. I have come to believe that, if we engage our conflicts at the Table in the context of Holy Communion, we will be present with Jesus and Holy Communion will become the most powerful, healing ritual known to humankind, especially when we bring to the table the lessons we have learned on conflict transformation.

I have seen the power of engaging each other at the Table, using, for example, the circle process, where we agree that no matter what the outcome of our conversations, we will together receive the bread and the cup.

- A family comes around the Table on a Wednesday night with members of the community who are ready to help the family deal with a son and his problem with drugs.
- An Order of Elders and an Order of Deacons come together around the Table to affirm the best moments of the annual conference and also to deal with all that is getting in the way of experiencing more of these best moments, including a lack of trust.
- The members of a local church threatening to leave the denomination come together at the Table with the bishop and other church leaders to deal with their differences.
- A sexual abuse victim and her abuser, along with supporting people for each, and the Bishop, the district superintendent, and the chair of the Board of Ordained ministry come to the Table to deal with the harm, accountability for the harm and healing for the victim, the offender and the communities involved.
- A worshipping community gets together every Wednesday night around the Table—a round communion table—to feast at the Table and to reflect on the Word in the context of an issue of importance to the community.

These are just examples of experiences where the conflict was brought to the Table. This is not to say that the Table provides an easy fix. As my professor Daniel Day Williams said, “Love does not resolve every conflict, it accepts conflict as the arena in which the word of love is to be done.” The Table recognizes the arena of conflict and allows us to name it. The Table recognizes that it is about the work of Love. The Table is a place where we can come “just as I am” and where “no secrets are hidden.” As John Wesley said, Holy Communion is a converting, not merely a confirming ordinance. It is not a reward for penance and merit but a means by which God transforms us more fully into God’s image. Ultimately, it does offer the place, the time, the ritual, and the spiritual power for healing relationships and doing the work of reconciliation in this world.

The belief in the importance of Holy Communion found resonance in the action of the General Conference of the United Methodist Church through its adoption in 2004 of *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*. The General Conference has instructed each church to study the ritual of Holy Communion and practice it weekly. My hope is that we all find our way to the Table in the midst of the conflicts of our times. Through the experience of Holy Communion and the practice of reconciliation at the Table, the Table will become for all of us and for our world a source of healing, transformed life, and new relationships, reconciled relationships, with one another and with God. □

Thomas W. Porter Jr. is Executive Director of JUSTPEACE Center for Mediation and Conflict Transformation of the United Methodist Church. He is an ordained elder of the New England Annual Conference, a trial lawyer, and a teacher at Boston University School of Theology in addition to being a professional mediator. He is the editor of the book *Conflict and Communion*, forthcoming from Discipleship Resources in March 2006.



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