

## NOURISH YOUR FAITH

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California  
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Someone has said, "Feed your faith; starve your fears." Let your fears--fear of the future, fear of job insecurity, fear of your ability to cope and handle, fear of your acceptance by people, fear of poor health, fear of the unknown, fear of death--die from lack of nourishment! Do not give fear any attention. Let fear die from malnutrition.

Instead, feed your faith. Faith is the ability to cope when your resources run out. Faith is the ability to believe in spite of doubts. Faith is the ability to advance into the future, into the unknown, into death, with courage, strength, even excitement! Nourish your faith!

How? Let's look at one means of nutrition, one basic staple in your faith diet, the sacrament of Holy Communion. What happens in Communion, and how does the act of Communion nourish your faith? What do you expect to happen in Communion?

Wherever I go as minister, I encourage the participation of children in Holy Communion, which is good Methodist theology. In one of my rural Minnesota churches, due to the Lutheran influence, it was the church's practice to leave the children in the pews during Communion, as if they were orphans. They believed that children should not participate in Communion until they were confirmed. So, wherever I went, I encouraged children to come. On this one occasion, the communion was proceeding very reverently and hushed. In those days we thought Communion had to be somber, sober and sedate. People whispered. The organ played soft "funeral" music in the background as people came to the rail. On this particular occasion, the hushed serenity was suddenly shattered when a little boy hollered at the top of his voice, "Hey, Mom, it's only grape juice!" Evidently, it wasn't the "blood" he expected to taste. His expectations were not met. What can we expect to happen when we come to Communion?

For centuries the church has disagreed. At one end of the spectrum, there are the Roman Catholics who believe that the bread and wine are transformed into the very body and blood of Jesus who is again sacrificed on our behalf. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those churches which believe that the believers in Christ gather together to remember the Last Supper. It is a memorial. Both of these extremes--the Roman Catholic and the "Memorialists"--usually insist that only their particular members may participate. Most United Methodists find ourselves in the middle between these two positions.

First, Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me," so Communion is a time to remember. It is like a family dinner or a family reunion where the family gathers. They come from all over to get together, to celebrate. During the course of the day, after the feast, some of the family sit back with a cup of coffee, and someone says, "Remember how Uncle Fred used to enjoy these reunions?" And someone else agrees and adds, "Yes, and remember the time he..." And off they go, remembering, reminiscing.

Communion is like that. We gather as the family of God. Children are welcome, for children are very important members of the family of God. We come as a family to the table. We remember our Lord. We talk about the heroes and heroines of the faith. We remember our departed loved ones.

And, as we remember, something happens. Remembering in the Old Testament was an essential act. The liturgies and festivals of Judaism remember. For example, they urge the people to remember the Exodus. Remember how God led us out of Egypt. Remember how we were slaves, and God took pity on us and saved us. Therefore, because you remember, take care of others. This is the Old Testament ethic. Have compassion on the needy. Work for justice. The remembering results in changed behavior.

In Communion, as in a family celebration, the remembering brings a sense of wholeness and unity. The children discover their roots. They learn how and where they belong. In Oberammergau this summer, the evening before the moving Passion Play, several of us worshipped in the small Lutheran Church. Communion was celebrated. The minister spoke in both German and English. The universality, the wholeness, the unity of the church family, transcending nationality, language, color, was experienced in that Communion service. Your faith is nourished in Communion when you realize you are not alone. You have a family here. We have a common heritage. God is our parent; Christ is our Savior; we are brothers and sisters.

Secondly, we remember Jesus--what he said and did--but there is more. Christ is also uniquely present. Jesus is not just a person who lived long ago, but he is the resurrected Christ, present to us in the Spirit. Jesus is present when we gather in his name, and uniquely, significantly, Christ is present in Communion. We call Communion a sacrament--a sacred act--because Christ is present, present in the bread and juice, present in the fellowship.

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, added another dimension to Communion. He taught that Communion is a means of grace, a means by which God can enter a person's life. Christ is uniquely present, and his amazing grace can become a reality to the worshipper. Many have been converted to Christ through Holy Communion. Many have committed their lives to Christ. Many have experienced forgiveness, wholeness, healing. Therefore, Methodism invites everyone to Communion, not just members, not just Christians. Everyone is invited, for Christ may reach you, touch you, embrace you as one of his.

Come to the Communion table with expectations. Expect to meet Christ here. Expect to be healed. Expect to be made whole. Expect to be forgiven and restored. Expect your faith to be nourished, to be fed.

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