

Getting Ready for a Miracle

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Texts: I Corinthians 10:16-17; 11:23-26; 12:12-13; Romans 12:1-5; John 6:53-58

Before I start talking about our scripture passages, I want to talk about food. I want to talk about this cookie. Have you ever thought about what a miracle eating is? Look at this cookie. It's a small round disk, made from various plant and animal materials. (It doesn't sound very appetizing, but if I tell you it's made up of butter, sugar and chocolate, it sounds more tasty!) This cookie is an inanimate object, it is just an object sitting there: behold, a cookie. I'm a human being completely separate from this cookie. I eat the cookie. And that's where we learn about the miracle of food. Food can be digested. Food can be transformed.

My mouth crunches up the cookie, and I swallow it. In my stomach, digestive juices begin the process of dissolving the cookie into more of a liquid. My stomach rolls the cookie around, and it eventually heads down into my intestines. There enzymes and the physical movement of my guts break down the cookie into very small molecules. The cookie begins to be absorbed. The cookie is made up of tiny pieces of carbohydrates, proteins, vitamins, water and salt. These particles begin to be absorbed through my digestive system; they go into my blood and are moved around my body. This cookie becomes energy so that I can move my legs. This cookie helps to repair my arm where I scraped it yesterday. This cookie becomes fat that is stored for future use.

Where is the cookie? Well, in a few minutes it will have been completely transformed; changed from an inanimate object into my own flesh and blood. It has become part of my body...so much a part of my body that the cookie has disappeared.

I am thankful for food because without this miracle of transformation, my body would disappear. Food sustains my physical body. I need a physical body, because it is the way I am in the world. My body allows me to speak, stand, walk, and relate to people. My body is the interface through which people see and talk to me. I need my body to be effective in the world. And the digestion of food is the miracle that keeps my body going, one bite at a time. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, that's the way God created us.

I don't think I have told you anything new. I think we understand this. We are very familiar with food, because we deal with it every day. Sitting down at a table, every day we get to participate in this miracle of eating and drinking. I just wanted to review it with you. So with this knowledge about food, let's turn our attention to our scripture passages.

When Jesus met with his disciples the night before he died, he said some very curious words to them. These words are recorded in three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, and they are also recorded in I Corinthians. Bible scholars tell us that I Corinthians is one of Paul's earliest letters, in fact, it's one of the earliest documents in the New Testament. It's the earliest window we have into the early church. In these gospels and this letter, the words are recorded which describe how Jesus broke a loaf of bread and said to his disciples, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." He took a cup of wine and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

Ever since Jesus said those words, Christian communities get together to worship and eat bread and drink wine. We say these words of Jesus, "This is my body broken for you," as we put bread in our mouths and start chewing. As we chew, we also ruminate; think about, the meaning of what we are doing. Hopefully you've been thinking about the meaning of the bread even before you walked into church today. We think about Jesus; his life, how his body was broken on a cross, and his resurrection from the dead. And we come to the Lord's table, and we hear again those words that Jesus said, "This is my body broken for you." Jesus' body is something we eat.

Hmmm... Food... We know about food. I eat the cookie and it disappears, remember? Food is absorbed and becomes part of our body. So...we eat and drink this bread and juice and Jesus becomes absorbed into who we are. Just like a cookie, you eat it and it disappears and becomes part of you. Is that what is happening? Jesus body and blood gets eaten, Jesus becomes just a part of me, just a part of you? Jesus disappears?

I don't think so! Scripture says something different is happening here. I Corinthians 10 says, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?"

Eating and drinking as participation? That is strange! When we eat a cookie, we aren't participating in being a cookie. We don't become cookie-like after we eat it. We eat the cookie and it's gone. I become more myself by eating the cookie, it becomes me! Here with this bread, something different is happening. As we take communion, as we eat the bread that is Jesus' body, it's not that Jesus becomes part of us, it's that we become part of Jesus. We participate in the body of the Christ.

As I come and eat this bread at the Lord's Table, as it is digested and broken down and integrated into my body. Do we consume Christ's body, or is Christ consuming us? Month after month, year after year, I eat the bread at the Lord's supper, I look at my hands. Is this my hand? Or is this the hand of Christ? At what point is it no longer me who lives, but Christ who lives in me? (Galatians 2:20)

At the Lord's table, we are being transformed into the body of Christ. Remember what bodies are? Our bodies are the way we are in the world. We interface with the world through our bodies. We speak, listen and act through our bodies, and it is through our bodies that people can know us, talk to us, and relate to us. Jesus is visible on earth today when his body, the church, is present. It is through the members of the body, that Jesus acts and is known. And the way that body is nurtured and nourished, is through communion. Through individuals and congregations coming together and remembering Jesus, and committing ourselves to loving Jesus, and through eating this bread...we are transformed into the body of Christ.

It's a miracle far vaster than just what happens in my own body, or even in our own bodies here in this building. People around the world are being transformed into the body of Christ. Christians in Coptic churches in Egypt, in Greek Orthodox churches in Syria, in African Independent churches in Kenya, in Catholic churches in El Salvador, in Baptist churches in Kansas. People eating the body and blood of Christ at the Lord's Table all over the world. Jesus' body growing organically, one bite at a time.

Now I am pretty sure that I have made some of you uncomfortable with my words about us eating the body of Christ. And I can practically hear your thoughts, "Well, Carol, you are taking this entirely too far. You are being WAY too literal with these words. Because after all the bread and the juice are just a symbol or a sign of Jesus' body. It's not really Jesus that we're eating. Let's not take this symbol too far. It's just a symbol."

I don't think the word "just" should be used to modify the noun "symbol". Symbols are powerful and effective in our life. And Jesus took symbols seriously. Jesus used very strong words to talk about the symbolism of his body and his blood. The gospel of John records these words of Jesus, "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven." John 6:53-58

These were hard words for people to understand. The gospel of John records that after Jesus said these words, his disciples grumbled, "This is a hard teaching, who can accept it." and "from this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." (John 6:60-66) This "hard teaching", these mysterious words, have given food for thought to theologians since the very beginnings of the church.

Early Anabaptists were united on what did not happen at the communion table. They were all convinced that the bread and the wine did not turn into the literal body and blood of Christ. That is what the Catholic church taught, with the doctrine of transubstantiation. All the Anabaptists agreed that communion was NOT that. But Anabaptists were not united on what was happening. That was a much more difficult problem.

Some early Anabaptists saw communion as a simple remembering of what Jesus did; nothing mystical at all. We come here and we remember together and these physical things, the bread and juice, help us remember. Period. Like a little string around our finger, the bread is just a physical thing that reminds us of something, something very important.

The Anabaptist Hans Denck, on the other hand, took a more mystical approach, saying that the bread and wine symbolized something mystical that actually was happening in an interior way. Other Anabaptists also had mystical interpretations of communion, but there was never a consensus on what it was in those early years, there were differences of opinion.

Menno Simons, a former Roman Catholic priest, explained communion by saying that the outward man received the Lord's Supper in bread and wine, but that the spiritual man received invisible bread and drink through the promises of God. (quoted in GAMEO, "Communion").

I don't know what you were taught about communion. Growing up I can't remember hearing those verses from John about feeding on Jesus. They are probably a bit too mystical for most Mennonite palates, and so we skip over them. As far as communion goes, I was taught to believe that we remember Jesus at the Lord's Supper. But in the way the Lord's Supper was practiced, it was also conveyed to me that the Lord's Supper is holy, it is mysterious, it is significant. I learned that participating in the Lord's Supper will change you.

Other branches of the church tree have taken a different tack on the Lord's Supper than Mennonites. In fact, how we understand this bread and what it is, is one of the difficulties in ecumenical dialogue today. What the Catholic and Orthodox church think about this bread on the Lord's Table is different than Mennonites, and different again from Lutherans, or Quakers.

It's a mystery that we have interpreted differently, and in fact churches have divided and people have killed each other over these verses. Which goes to show that we have missed something essential. Because no matter exactly what happens as we eat and drink, does it make any sense that Jesus would use his body to kill people? He never killed people in his life, why would he kill people through his body, the church?

What does this scripture mean for us today? What will we be doing when we are served from this table in a few minutes? Can we think about this loaf before us as bread from heaven? How do we digest this?

There are lots of theological words that could describe this process of Christ becoming incorporated or embodied in us. You can call it holiness. Or sanctification. Or purification. Slowly becoming more Christ-like. Being consumed by Christ. The Orthodox church would call it theosis, or coming into union with God. I like another word the Orthodox use...ingodded. God dwelling in us. We become ingodded.

Whatever words you use, I believe that the Lord's Supper changes us. As I have worked in churches I have seen people coming up month after month, year after year, for communion. And I've seen Jesus becoming more and more present in the lives of people. People's bodies being transformed into the body of Christ.

A person gets hurt by angry and bitter words that are spoken to them by their neighbour. I would expect them to lash back with bitter or blaming words. But instead I see them describing the situation with love, trying to get into the mind of the person who hurt them. "They don't know how they are coming across, they don't realize how hurtful those words are." They are being transformed. They are listening with Jesus' ears, they are speaking with Jesus' lips.

One of the busiest people I know, with a stressful and important job and many demands at home, finds the time to take a meal to someone who is sick. They don't just drop it off, they visit and spend time with the housebound person. I ask them how they find time in their busy schedule to do that. They tell me, "I had to find time to do this, it's important." This person is being transformed. They are Jesus' hands, they are Jesus' feet.

I see someone who comes into some unexpected money. Now they can afford to get some great new technological devices, or maybe go on a really fabulous vacation, or make a hefty donation to their retirement savings plan...but instead they use that money to make a donation to an orphanage in Haiti. They say, "This is what I love to do with my money." They are being transformed. They are thinking with Jesus' mind.

I see a congregation that finds out about a family living in danger in another country. This family may not reach safety, they may be killed. And so the congregation sponsors them and welcomes them to a new country. The congregation tells them, "Helping you is what we are here for; it's who we are." This congregation is being transformed. They are the arms of Jesus, embracing, welcoming.

I see a church coming together week by week in worship, proclaiming the good news of Jesus's life and death and resurrection, living as a community that loves and supports each other, reaching out to help others, standing as one with the global church. I see a congregation singing, "The church is the body of Christ, his arms, ears and eyes, hands and feet..." This congregation is being transformed. It is filled with the breath of the Spirit, it is Christ's body on earth.

We eat food every day, it's one of life's little mysteries, a cookie being transformed into me. Today when we come to the Lord's Table, you have to ask yourself. Is this just bread? Is it something I just mechanically chew and swallow and it disappears and I never think about it again?

Or is this the bread of heaven? Do we want it to be bread from heaven? Are we ready to be transformed, to participate in Jesus, to have Jesus incorporated in us. Are you willing to look at your hand and say, "This is no longer my hand, but the hand of Christ through me?" Are we willing as a church, to say, "No longer our church, but the church of Christ through us?"

If this is what we long for, if this is how we want to live, we come to the Lord's Table, ready for a miracle. Let's pray:

Be present at our Table Lord
be here and everywhere adored
These mercies bless and grant that we
May feast in fellowship with Thee.