

Tonight's talk is on the sacrament called Eucharist, which comes from a Greek word meaning "thanksgiving." The Eucharist is the focal point of Christian worship; it's the highest expression of who we ultimately are. And here's my central message about the Eucharist: **Eucharistic liturgy is fundamentally a celebration of what we are. And by celebrating the ideal of who we are, we enable ourselves to become that ideal.**

Because it's our highest expression, it is rich in themes like a great novel and these themes intertwine and flow in and out of one another. Themes like thanksgiving, sacrifice, communion, unity, service, public worship, initiation, and forgiveness. But because of the limitations of time, I'm not going to cover most of these themes in detail, rather I'll just allude to the themes at different times in my talk.

Tonight's talk will talk about things as diverse as why there are 7 days in the week to reflection on how what we do each day is a reflection of what we ultimately value and eventually forms us to be who we are.

Start with some experiences

So let's jump into the themes, experiences and history of Eucharist with some reflection on our own experiences.

Eucharist is comfort and order

Habit, or what Aquinas called *habitus*, is a powerful thing. By externalizing something, we can affect the way in which we experience it. Example of socks turned right side out: I didn't like doing wash and then having to turn my socks around. So I ended up finding that the best time to turn them rightside out was to never turn them inside out. Thus, I created a habit of taking socks/clothes off rightside out. Laundry now has an order to it.

Eucharist is priorities, recommitment and deepening

On a deeper level, telling Michelle I love her daily deepens our love. We ritualize it with a hug and a kiss when I get home. I first go to her. Then I go to our daughter. So we have an experience, and then we choose whether we will let that experience begin to form our view of the world. If we do, then we begin to seek out similar experiences that confirm that view of the world. After a time, we might choose to help create the environment so that more experiences like that can occur and can continue to confirm our view of the world. We do it, whether consciously or unconsciously.

The attitude becomes our creed, and the behavior becomes our code. My creed is that my marriage is the primary relationship in my life. My code is that Michelle comes first, even over our daughter.

Eucharist forms who we are

On an individual level, habit creates a direction out of our fundamental option of how we choose to be. Imagine your life as a river. Early on in the stages of a river, it lacks definition of its boundaries. When floods come, the waters overflow the banks and roam wherever the land takes them. When the waters recede, the river may be heading down a different path. But as a river matures, it gradually finds its course and by continuing to flow along that course, it deepens its base. When its base deepens, it can take on more water. So that when the next flood occurs, there is a greater likelihood that the waters will not overflow the banks. And even if they do, when the waters recede, odds are the river will for the most part still follow its original course. When a river is truly mature, it has cut its way deep into the land and a huge volume of water can flow its course. Its banks are high and firm as it cuts into the bedrock and neither floods nor torrents can change its course. That's what *habitus* does for us. It gives us increasingly firm direction in the way we choose to act and react to our world. By regularly joining in the Eucharist, we acquire a habit, a consistent way of being, that ultimately affects not only who we are, but also who we will become.

Eucharist is life: gathering, sharing and acting

Club: group of 4 of us who were friends in college, got together one night and had an anchovy, garlic, onion and green pepper pizza. It was great! Probably because our time together was so great. We enjoyed the meal together so much that we decided to gather monthly and our pizza became a ritual around which we shared stories of how we were doing and what was going on in our lives. But it wasn't good enough just to share a meal, we needed to do something: miniature golf, movie, something else. Eventually,

because of the busy-ness of our lives, we had to clarify the structure: we meet every 3rd Thursday of the month, rotating to a different person's house. We go out for the special pizza and then there has to be some surprise activity that we can all gripe about. Those who don't show are ridiculed the next time we get together. Somehow, this monthly gathering is profoundly important to all of us. We don't want to miss this time together. It has become more than simply a social gathering, it has become a sign of our continued commitment to each other, of our valuing of our friendship, of our affirmation of the importance of each other in our lives, and of our connectedness across the years and our different paths.

I think you get the picture. There's something about being human that looks for patterns and consistent ways of acting as we mature in our picture of who we are. Let me ask some questions that might help you reflect on these patterns, this *habitus*, in your own life:

- Profound experience of gratitude to God? What did you do? I either sang, or prayed, or did some ritual action
- Hard to see in today's secular world, but have you ever been part of a group that has had a profound experience of gratitude toward God? Cancer survivors, 12 steppers, etc. Gather as a group and celebrate somehow? Do you ever do that with your family or friends or others?

History

Eucharist is a bond to our communal roots

It was through experiences like the ones I've talked about and you've reflected on that 4000 years ago at the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin, 2 kinds of people -- shepherds and farmers -- sought to create meaning in their lives together. The shepherds were gypsies who didn't own the land. The farmers were settlers who did own the land. Because they were in the northern hemisphere, they both celebrated a springtime ritual on the first full moon after the vernal equinox in which the shepherds sacrificed a baby lamb to bargain with the gods, and the farmers baked a batch of unleavened bread (without flavor) as a sign of pureness of a new beginning.

Eucharist is a celebration of gratitude

These rituals formed a way of looking at the world -- one of gratitude -- and inculcated it into a habitual perspective. You see, **we** are in charge of how we view life as individuals. As I've said before, I think this is the basis of what Jesus was trying to get at when he said the Kingdom of God is upon you. And the way we view life leads to how we experience life. And once we find a way of doing this, we repeat it in a consistent manner because it creates the structure for what we think life is all about: it becomes the glasses through which we find meaning (or lack thereof) in life.

Thus it was with the people who lived on the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin. Their rituals formed their attitude of gratitude toward the God who gave them the land on which they depended and got their year off to a good start.

At a certain point in their existence, the Egyptians became powerful neighbors and eventually conquered that land and took the Hebrew shepherds and farmers into exile. These Hebrew people began to intermarry and their rituals became combined, but were suppressed by the Pharaoh. But when they escaped from Egypt on the day that became known as Passover, they could again celebrate these core rituals of gratitude, now enhanced with more meaning because God helped them escape from Egypt. Thus, the Passover meal occurs on the first full moon after the vernal equinox and includes an immolated lamb (from the shepherd ancestry), blood of the lamb to symbolize their spared Jewish ancestors, unleavened bread (from the farmer ancestry), and cups of blessing giving glory to God.

Eucharist is a sacred remembering

The dynamics that are at work in this feast of remembrance are the remembering of the constitutive event of Judaism: the movement from exodus to Mount Sinai and the remembering of a future in which a Messiah will come to liberate them spiritually. And throughout this remembering, they renew their covenant with God and thus, their relationship with God.

The form of prayer they used was the Berakah, or prayer of blessing. It begins with an opening exclamation, then a remembrance of the marvelous works of God for his people, then petitions which acknowledge the dominion of God over the mystery of life, and finally a doxology or standard final prayer.

Eucharist is sacred action

This is the same form that Jesus used at the Last Supper. But Jesus transformed it by taking the elements of the Passover meal and changing their meaning to a memorial of **his** death and resurrection. His Last Supper becomes our first mass. In it, he combines memorial word (Berakah prayer) and memorial action: take, bless, break, and share.

Eucharist is a sign of perfection

Let’s step back just for a bit and understand a little about the timing of all of this. We know that the springtime ritual of the Northern Hemisphere people of the eastern Mediterranean formed the frame in which all of these prayers of gratitude rested. But timing is even more intertwined in all of this. We don’t know why there is a 7-day week. The best we can determine is that there was a group called the “smithies” that accompanied the early Jews. They considered 7 an unlucky number, perhaps because after 6 days of work, they became tired and clumsy and needed some rest. But the Jews make the 7th day their holy day. Perhaps because they had been slaves and slaves never rest. So the Jews celebrated their freedom by resting on the 7th day. 7 eventually became a sign of perfection. And if 7 was perfection, then 7 times 7 was the fullness of perfection. And 7 times 7 plus 1, or 50, became a new era after perfection. Thus the Sinai Covenant of Moses occurs on the 50th year after the Exodus, and the day of Pentecost occurs on the 50th day after Easter.

Eucharist is a new beginning

The early church soon picked up this new action and adopted it as the central prayer of the church. They chose to celebrate it on the day after the Sabbath for two reasons: first, the eighth day was a new beginning (7 + 1); but foremost, the sign of Sundays has to do with the resurrection, and the ritualization of the resurrection forms the habit upon which Christianity chooses to view meaning in the world. The early church could have chosen to gather on the day of Jesus’ death, a Friday, but they chose to gather on Sunday, the day of his resurrection, and the central image of the core message of Christianity.

Eucharist is a sacred meal

The early Christians were given a clear direction of how they were to be from Jesus himself. Jesus spent a large portion of his ministry around a table, sharing a meal. It was during the meal that he shared his vision of how we should be. And it was during the last meal he shared before his death that he gave the great commission of how those who believe in him should be: sharing a meal, and being with him again in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup.

The church also joined the Berekah prayer (which in Greek is *eucharistia*) with a liturgy of the word, for they were excommunicated from the synagogue. After a brief period, the stories of Jesus were included in this liturgy of the word, and eventually, the stories of the early church were included as well. These stories were not simply a recounting of the past, but a message to the present and a beacon to how we should see our future.

Let’s look at the dynamics of having a meal: in general, in specific reference to the meal my friends and I share once a month, and in light of the Eucharist.

General description	Example in monthly meal with friends	Eucharistic equivalent
Gather and say “hi”	Meet at one of our houses	Introductory rite: Gathering, Opening Song, Opening Prayer, Penitential Rite, etc.
Tell stories about what’s been happening and what we hope will happen to us	Talk about our lives and recount goofy stories from our past while creating yet more stories to be told in the future	Liturgy of the Word: 1 st reading, Responsorial Psalm, 2 nd reading, Gospel, Homily
Sit around table and prepare to	Arrive at pizza place, order meal,	Eucharistic Prayer and

eat	anticipate meal, say grace	Communal Prayers
Eat and Drink	Chow down, stop talking	Communion
Relax after meal	Talk about how good the pizza was, start wondering what we're going to do next	Reflection and communion song
Leave	Head off for some activity for the rest of the evening	Dismissal and commission of service

What does the Eucharist mean?

It is the presence of the risen Christ in a concrete and immediate way in the midst of the assembled faithful, uniting them to form the reality of the Church in the world. This presence is expressed in a community action in which the presider of the assembly takes bread and wine as Jesus did, and pronounces over them the words of Jesus Christ "This is my body, this is my blood." The action is only complete when the offerings are consumed, as a sign of unity and faith. The Eucharist is the transubstantiation of ordinary offerings, basic elements of our daily lives, bread and wine, into the body and blood of Christ. It is not simply a memorial dependent on human initiative, but is an encounter with the fundamental offering of God to us.

How does the Eucharist mean?

By taking the history of a meal of thanksgiving into account, from the gratitude of the early shepherds and farmers, to the liberating Passover meal of the Jews, to the challenge of the last supper to do as Christ did, a context is formed for the celebration. In the action of gathering, sharing stories, entering into the Eucharistic prayer, receiving communion, and being sent on mission, the basics of bread and wine become much more powerful symbols of God in us as individuals (after we consume them) and God in the community (after the whole community has received him); of where we and God have been, who we and God are, and who we are called to be. (use spiral diagram) They become the elements around which our dance of life is celebrated.

Closing

Eucharist celebrates us as having a unity with and a mission to others. But is it a celebration of our past or a celebration of our present and future? Do we gather because we are mission to others or do we gather in order to become mission to others? Just like the berekah prayer was a prayer of remembrance of the past and looking forward to a remembrance of a future in which the messiah would come, is Eucharist not really a remembrance of a big picture: that God was with us, is with us and will be with us in a way beyond our understanding. Does not the ritual form our perspective of our future? And thus is Eucharist not a celebration of what we are and what we shall become even moreso than a celebration of what we were?

By engaging in the Eucharist at least weekly, if not daily, we begin that *habitus*, that fundamental and consistent way of being, and deepen the channel of our life of action and our relationship with God. The Eucharist defines the path that our river should flow. Let your continued participation in the Eucharist create the river that defines who you are. For by engaging in and celebrating the ideal of who we are in the Eucharist, we eventually become that ideal.

The flow of the Eucharistic Liturgy, or Mass

- Introduction
 - 1st we assemble as a people of prayer
 - as we gather, some people talk, others pray
 - a song is sung to denote the entrance of those with special roles
- Greeting
 - Priest says “hi”
- Penitential Rite
 - we examine our lives in light of what we are celebrating
 - life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ
 - and his presence in our lives
 - and our response is
 - to ask for mercy
 - to sing praise for God’s mercy and love
 - in the *Gloria*
- Prayer Response
 - in light of what we have just done, we pray in silence that we may be more mindful of God in our lives
 - one particular aspect that we might be mindful of is mentioned by the priest, and the theme of this ties in with the Liturgy of the Word

Eucharistic liturgy is fundamentally a celebration of what we are. And by celebrating the ideal of who we are, we enable ourselves to become that ideal.

Themes

- Thanksgiving, sacrifice, communion, unity, service, public worship, initiation, and forgiveness.
- Eucharist is comfort and order
- Eucharist is priorities, recommitment and deepening
- Eucharist forms who we are
- Eucharist is life: gathering, sharing and acting
- Eucharist is a bond to our communal roots
- Eucharist is a celebration of gratitude
- Eucharist is a sacred remembering
- Eucharist is sacred action
- Eucharist is a sign of perfection
- Eucharist is a new beginning
- Eucharist is a sacred meal

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