

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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Remembering: The Meaning of the Lord's Supper

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 NRSV For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

I have a news flash for you: I like to eat. Did you know that? Well, except maybe for those pesky cooked vegetables.... From my wife Barbara's amazingly wondrous homemade sweet rolls, to Mike Hatler's Dr. Pepper and Hatch Chili Hamburgers, to barbecue here in the Springs under the tutelage of Matt and Sue Hesser, to those incredible candies that the Niswongers make at Patsie's Candies, to the plenteous panoply of oh-so-yummy things that grace our chat and coffee tables each Sunday because of the joyful generosity and talent of so many of you. And just as you do your part in bringing those things, I figure I need to do my part in eating them, because... I like to eat.

I also like to talk. That's a good gift to have in ministry – presuming, of course, that what one has to say is worth saying. I spend a lot of time reaching and praying and thinking so that when I open my mouth in this pulpit or in conversations with you, I hope I will indeed have something worth saying. But I also like to listen. I have loved listening to the stories you have told me about your lives. I love hearing about the history of this congregation. I love hearing some of our old-timers tell me about life in

the Springs when Union Ave was the city limits.

Eating, talking, listening. Perhaps the best thing is occasions which combine all three. One of **my** most cherished occasions for doing so is something that one of my friends, my best friend, in fact, after Barbara, have done together now for over thirty years. Bob Hill is his name and he is the pastor of a Disciples church in Kansas City and you may have heard me mention him before. Each year for the past thirty two, we have gotten together once a year for several days. We call these annual get-togethers “Boys Camp,” because when we started we actually camped – in tents with air mattresses and Coleman stoves – and my hair was not gray and he had hair. But over the years, our definition of what constitutes “camping” got looser as our knees and our backs gotten creakier. So now, “camping” is likely to be a road trip through the desert, staying at hotels at night, exchanging the campfires for the DVD player where we catch up on all the “guy flicks” from the past year.

When all is said and done, it is actually a wonderful continuing education event, as we learn from each other, as we discuss what we’ve been reading, as we share insights about ministry in our congregations – in short, as we **eat**, as we **talk**, and as we **listen**! In fact, Bob and I are having our annual gathering in a couple of weeks and I look forward to the renewal it will bring and look forward to sharing what I experience and learn with you. Now, one of the things that we also always seem to do is to bring to mind stories from our previous Boys Camps over the decades, stories that grow more cherished in the telling and re-telling. *“Do you remember the time I accidentally drop-kicked the Coleman lantern halfway across Indiana?” “Do you remember that time*

you got lost driving and, being a guy, couldn't stand the thought of asking for directions even though there were dozens of people we passed who probably knew where they were?" Now, I see some of you smiling because I know that you do exactly the same sort of thing when you gather with long-time friends and family: You share the stories that have formed you. You recall the things together that have made you. You eat, you talk, you listen – you **remember**. You **remember**.

But imagine, if you will, what it would be like if every time your friends and family had gotten together in the past, the memories of that get together in fact began quickly to fade away with the present piling on top of them until you could no longer recall those gatherings, with the those events getting covered over forever like the tides slowly covering markings in the sand. Now, **if** life were that way, then in a very crucial sense we would have to say that every such gathering was never really completed, was it? One preacher I know¹ puts the point this way: Nothing is, in fact, ever fully or really completed or finished until we remember it, until we bring it back from the past and into the present, until we select, as it were, what we shall choose to carry forward, until, indeed, our memories become a tradition. **That** is when a family gathering, or a trip, or a shared experience or a “Boys Camp” is truly completed. And here’s the thing: because through the gift of such memories, the power of the past becomes available to continue to transform the future – because, face it, the things that we forget become, in the end, the same as if they’d never happened. How much poorer our lives would be if we could not remember, if there were no tradition that feeds us and grounds us and

¹Fred Craddock, cited from memory.

roots us and is available to us again and again and again.

What is the point of these reflections? Just this: Every Sunday we at First Christian Church gather around the Table of the Lord for communion, the Lord's Supper. And what we do, in its own way, is exactly what happens in "Boys Camp" and is exactly what happens in your family gatherings: we **remember**. It is there, in the lines of Jesus that Paul passes along to us that we say at this Table when we gather at here: *Do this in remembrance of me.*" Now the meaning of the Lord's Supper, of communion, will not be exhausted by one sermon, but today – and from time to time in the future – I want to look at the meaning of the Lord's Supper and why it has such power for us as Christians, as members of this part of Christ's Body. So let us, this morning, focus for a moment on what it means to do something "in **memory**" of Jesus.

Now, of course, if we take that phrase too literally or too woodenly, it becomes a problem and a puzzle. For not one of us here, of course, is able literally to remember Jesus. Only for a few years could anyone *literally* remember him. But I think our clue to what is meant by this can be found in Luke's gospel, when Luke tells of the Last Supper. Luke says this in his telling of this story that Paul has also handed on to us: "Then [Jesus] took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, '*Take this and divide it among yourselves....*'" (Luke 22:17 NRSV). *Divide it among yourselves.* That's the key: the memory of the man Jesus Christ becomes the memory of what those who follow him reveal. And they in turn reveal that and pass along that memory of a memory to those who follow them. And so on and so for 2000 years now. Now this does not seem

to be any great revelation; but in fact it I think it is: for what it means is that the knowledge of the faith, the knowledge of Jesus, is based on a huge web of trust that spans 80 generations and the whole world.

So what? Well, just this: when you and I come to this Table, what we find here is the testimony, the witness, of all those others who have come in trust and confidence to this Table. We find God here in all of those who have molded us and shaped us, those who have loved us and led us, those who have been the witnesses to the work of God in their lives. We never come to this Table alone; to be a Christian is to be part of a web of trust; there are no self-made Christians or churches. And the Table reminds us of that as we remember those who remembered who remembered – and so on and so on – going back to Christ himself and along the way cherishing and preaching the gospel of God.

Let me close this way, and go back to where I started. I said that the Lord's Supper is about remembering – as we listen, as we eat, as we talk. Taken together, these constitute the kind of “remembering” that Jesus is talking about. And taken separately they tell us these things:

First, listening. Jesus invites you to come to this Table with your ears open, your souls ready to hear. Sometimes it will be things you need to hear, a word of comfort, a word of hope. Sometimes it will be things you need to hear but don't want to hear: a word of assessment, a word of judgement even where you were less than what you know you should have been or should have done. Sometimes it will be a word that we didn't even know we needed or wanted: a whole new revelation, an “aha” moment, a

new insight that put it all together, or a word of grace or hope or possibility. It is the same way at this table: as with any meal, you listen, you listen. And so this and every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, listen to what Jesus is trying to say.

Second, eating. That seems obvious, of course, but when you come to this Table this and every morning, I want you to realize that the physical act of eating is profoundly important here. And think about what it is that we consume: bread and juice. What could be more ordinary? – delicious, but something we eat daily. And yet it is the very ordinariness of these elements that reminds us that God through Jesus Christ is in and a part of even the most ordinary moments of life. In the most mundane act that we *can* do, we also do the most important act that we *must* do to sustain our lives: we eat. And in bread or cup, God is present. God is present in every moment, every meal, reminding us that He is never absent. If you are tempted to forget that, then let the tang of the cup and the texture of the bread on your tongue remind you indeed that God is not far-off, ethereal, but in the here and the now, in every moment, in every breath you take and in every move you make. “Take and eat in remembrance of me” indeed!

And third, talking: Unlike a fast food meal, taken at the drive-through when you are by yourself in the car, this is a meal that lingers and which Jesus wants you to talk about. Jesus wants you to start, from this very Table, talking of what God has done in your life. Jesus hopes that you will find others, whose diet of both physical and spiritual bread has been too meager, and tell them what you found, what you know, how you have been fed here. Have you found at this Table a God of gentleness and justice in a world too often too full of caprice and pain and hurt? Then go from this table, the taste

of the bread still on your lips, to talk and talk and talk about how your life has been changed through the power of the Gospel, the gospel that has such a visceral and vivid embodiment at this table, in these ordinary elements, among these ordinary people, in this ordinary place – and yet all of them made extraordinary because of what God through Jesus Christ has done and continues to do.

My friends, this meal is too great a good news to ever keep it to ourselves. It's like knowing of a wonderful new restaurant, with great food that you just have to tell your friends about. For this banquet here at this Table has not only delicious bread, but it is bread and cup which reminds us of life eternal and life abundant. So, go tell your friends, tell your neighbors about this wonderful meal, this wonderful grace, that is to be found here every first Sunday. And for this meal and for that opportunity, thanks be to God!