

Bread that Breaks Rules

A sermon on John 6:1-15 by Nathan Nettleton, 25 July 2021

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Message

The indiscriminate ways Jesus shared and spoke about food broke the rules of his society and the rules of many churches down to this day.

Sermon

Ever since the days of Jesus, the Church has argued and tussled over rules about the practice of the Lord's Table, the Eucharist. So many rules. And the last year has multiplied these arguments all over again as the sudden arrival of widespread online worship has opened up new questions. Is it theologically possible to celebrate the Lord's Table online, or is there something about embodied physical unity that is so absolutely essential to the Eucharist that any online version is necessarily a nonsense? So many questions. And the controversy goes on.

Of course, being a church that has just decided that its future will continue to be online, these new questions are pretty important to us. I spent much of the last week at an international conference of liturgical scholars, and it's fair to say that quite a few of them are pretty dubious about whether an online Eucharist is at all valid. Big questions.

Our gospel readings lately have been tracking through Mark's account of the story of Jesus, but with tonight's reading, we begin a five week detour into John's account, and all five weeks will be spent in a single chapter in which Jesus identifies himself as the Bread of Life and gives his most extended teaching on the nature of the Eucharist. Funnily enough, he doesn't actually say anything about cyber chapels or online communion!

But the things he does say and do make a mockery of many of the rules that churches have come up with around the table over the years, and at least a couple of them are explicit in the bit we heard tonight. So let me start with what is mentioned in this reading before I ask whether it might have any implications for our new digital age questions.

By way of introduction to these questions, let me point out something that is a bit strange about the way these things get debated. If it were a court case, we might say that it is a question of admissible evidence; what gets included and what doesn't. It makes a big difference. Everyone is agreed that what Jesus did and didn't do is important to our understanding of what we should and shouldn't do at the table. But many theologians ignore the many many stories of Jesus at various meal tables, and focus their attention only on what Jesus did and didn't do at the last supper. It's almost as if Jesus only ever had one meal in his life. Or only one meal that mattered anyway.

The thing that highlights how odd this is is, in fact, this chapter of John's gospel that we begin looking at tonight. It contains the most extended bit of teaching about the Eucharist directly from Jesus, and yet it doesn't connect it to the last supper at all. As we heard tonight, Jesus gives us this Eucharistic teaching in response to his feeding of huge crowd – five thousand men, and God knows how many women and children, probably at least as many again. So if the Bible itself directly points us to this meal with the crowd as a source for thinking about the Eucharist, why would anyone be treating it as inadmissible evidence?

There's a bit of a chicken-or-egg argument here, but the answer might just be that if you start with this meal, and many other meals of Jesus, you might quickly arrive at answers that upset the apple cart for these theologians, so they don't want to go there. The first question I want to look at is a perfect example of this, and it is one on which our church has been a dissenting voice long before online worship.

The question is "who is allowed to receive the body and blood of Christ at the Lord's table?" The vast majority of Christian churches for two thousand years have said that only baptised Christians are allowed. Many churches have restricted it even further than that. For many centuries, the practice of the Roman Catholic church was to only allow those who were baptised and confirmed Christians who had reached a certain age, and who had recently made confession of their sins to a priest.

Some reformed protestant churches did a similar thing, and sent the elders to visit everyone in the congregation in the weeks before a communion service to interview them about the current state of their faith and the holiness of their living, and only if satisfied, they issued them with a communion token that they had to present in order to be accepted at the communion table.

Many Baptist churches used to restrict communion, not just to baptised Christians, but to those baptised in "the right way", and many also went further and only accepted those who were presently in active membership of a Baptist church, or in some cases only of their own particular Baptist church. That is not so common now, especially among Baptists in the western world, but you can still find it.

Now, if you restrict the admissible biblical evidence to just the last supper, you can see how these kind of tight restrictions might be justified. Who did Jesus break bread with at the last supper? Well, the only people that the Bible mentions being at the last supper were Jesus's chosen disciples. It doesn't explicitly say that no one else was there, but we aren't told about anyone else being there. So you can see how you could use that to support the teaching that the Lord's Table is not a free-for-all, but a meal for the chosen few. If Jesus limited it to only the official insiders, then perhaps that is supposed to be how it should be for us too.

Now even if you accept that, you are still going to have trouble justifying some of the practices of demanding confession or an interview about your current holiness before communion, because we know for sure that the chosen ones at the last supper included Judas Iscariot, and the Bible explicitly tells us that Jesus already knew that Judas was going to betray him. So if Jesus didn't see any reason to exclude Judas, who are we to be making judgments about other baptised believers and whether they are worthy to receive or not?

But anyway, what would happen if, instead of the last supper, you started your Eucharistic wonderings with the story of the feeding of the five thousand, as indeed John's gospel does? Now we *are* talking about a free-for-all!

Jesus does not feed the crowd one at a time, looking each one in the eyes and assessing their worthiness or their eligibility. He simply blesses the bread and sends it on its way through the crowd, and we are told that it miraculously multiplied as it spread through the crowd so that *everyone* had more than enough. Everyone.

We are told quite a lot about this crowd, and it is perfectly clear that they were not a uniform crowd of committed followers of Jesus. Jesus actually has some quite negative things to say about their motivations for seeking him out, and by the end of the chapter, we are told that many of them give up on him completely. But Jesus does not seem to think that any of that is any reason not to break bread and share it freely with them. We know there were children there too, because we are told that the one who came up with the first five loaves of bread was a young boy. Far from being excluded because he is not old enough yet, he gets an honoured place in the story of this meal.

Of course, if we read more widely still, and look at the patterns of the many many meals we are told about Jesus eating with others, we will soon see that one of the most frequent charges brought against Jesus was that he ate meals with people who the religious rules said he should not allow at the table. And we will also see that one of the things that Jesus most objected to about the religious rules of his day was the way they were used to exclude people and put fences around the tables. Arguably, the most significant cause of the anger that led to the execution of Jesus was his deliberate refusal to comply with the rules about who you could and couldn't eat with. It enraged everybody. Murderously.

Now you people know me well enough to know that I seek to respect the wisdom of the ancient churches, and to follow their teachings where I can. But this is one question on which I have to say, albeit with fear and trepidation, "I'm sorry, but the majority of the church for the majority of history appears to have been out of step with Jesus himself on this question, and when that happens, my commitment is to Jesus first. If I have to choose between the teachings of Jesus, and the teachings of the church, I'm going with Jesus."

Churches like ours that have practiced an open table – that say that whosoever will may come to commune – have often been criticised as just being sucked in by modern wishy-washy tolerance that just wants to be nice and avoid offending anybody. And maybe there are some churches whose reasons for practicing an open table haven't been thought out any more than that. But unless those accusers are going to accuse Jesus of the same thing, then they can bugger off so far as I'm concerned, because this is precisely an act of obedience to Jesus, and refusing to cooperate with excluding people from the table was one of Jesus's big ticket issues, and one that he was willing to die for. Wishy-washy it's not.

Now just before I take an imaginative leap into the question about online eucharist in a cyber chapel, let me point out one more little quirky flip-of-the-finger to the rules in this story of the feeding of the crowd. I don't mean to pick on the Roman Catholic church, but they are the church who have been most addicted to nailing down absolutely everything in infallible rules in Canon law, so they are always going to be in the conversation when we talk about church rules. The Roman Catholic church has made an official written law about what communion bread has to be made of. The rules don't say that it has to look like bread or taste like bread – apparently it is okay if it looks like a little disk of polystyrene – but it must be made of wheat flour. Asian Catholics, for example, are not allowed to use rice flour. Even if you are in a part of the world that doesn't produce wheat, communion bread must be made from wheat flour. In tonight's story in John's gospel, we are explicitly told what the bread that Jesus broke and shared was made of. Yep, barley. "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish." Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to all. So much for Canon law!

Okay. Now, I'm not going to pretend for a moment that either Jesus or the Bible had anything specific to say about online worship and the do's or don'ts of celebrating Eucharist fun a cyber chapel, so I am going to endeavour to keep my comments about this relatively short and hopefully relatively modest.

But the first thing to say is probably fairly obvious given what I've said so far, and that is that Jesus is a lot less interested than most of our fellow theologians in coming up with rules that limit the availability of the bread of life that he is offering us. As we have seen, his only interest in the rules that limit who he could eat with is in breaking them and denouncing them. So I don't think it is too big a stretch to think we can take clue from that as to how he is likely to approach any new digital age arguments that attempt to limit who can eat with him and when and how. He had no interest in dividing the five thousand into accepted and unaccepted, and he didn't even let the fact that they had almost no food to start with get in the way of celebrating a bloody fantastic meal with them all.

So what do you reckon Jesus might have done if a pandemic had hit and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, put the whole of Galilee into lockdown and made everybody stay home for four months? There are only five reasons to leave your homes, and attending a free-for-all bread and wine picnic with ten thousand non-socially-distancing people on a hillside at the invitation of a politically unpopular preacher is not one of them!

Now I can't imagine Jesus taking the lead in an anti-lockdown rally. I imagine he would support suppression measures like lockdowns to keep people safe, and that he would be encouraging us to vaccinate the whole world as quickly as we can, starting with the poorest and most vulnerable in countries that are too crowded to do lockdowns and distancing and quarantine, and leaving wealthy people in low-risk countries like Australia till everyone else was safe. But I can't imagine the Jesus we met in this story tonight responding to the pandemic lockdowns by saying, "Oh well, that's it then. You'll all have to abstain from all eucharistic celebration until it is safe to gather and eat with the whole congregation in the church again, and I don't care if you've come up with some fancy new technology that enables you to gather safely in a new way. The rules have already been set for all time, and that hasn't been allowed for, so No! No! No!"

Now I could get a lot more fancy and technical about this, and point out that our theology of the resurrected and ascended Jesus has long said that he is no longer confined to being in one place at a time, and that therefore he is perfectly capable of gathering us together into his one body without requiring us to all first get ourselves into the one room. And that would just be for starters. But don't get me started. And it's not the point anyway, is it?

The point is that this is the risen Jesus who invites us to his table. This is the same Jesus who stood on that hillside and said, "What? You haven't got enough bread to feed all these people? Well bugger that! You have now! There you go! Start distributing that!" Do you reckon he'd let arguments about the limitations of online embodiment stop him from inviting us to his table? I don't think so. And that's probably about as technical as we need to get.

So we're going to accept his invitation to sing and pray and break bread and raise our cups in celebration here tonight. And if some of our fellow theologians are worried that that might not satisfy their intellectual sensibilities or the long established rules and traditions of the church, good luck to them.