

Breakfast on the Beach

What can Unitarian Universalists glean from the Christian stories of Jesus's death and the days that followed? What does food have to do with faith? Do these questions relate to each other? Come reflect with Sara Mackey; let us make meaning together.

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
May 4, 2008
Sara Mackey©

Breakfast on the Beach

There's an old story about a stable boy who saw a wealthy lord walking all around the stable yard, evidently searching for something. The lord commanded, "Help me search," and the boy asked, "What are you looking for?"

"I dropped a ring," the lord answered, "set with magnificent gems. It's a priceless treasure."

"And you dropped it in the stable yard?" the boy said.

"No," the lord answered, "I dropped it in the stable."

"Then why are you looking for it out here?" the boy asked.

"It's too dark in the stable," the lord told him. "It's easier to search out here in the light."

"That may be true," said the boy, who was, after all, wiser than the lord, as it usually the case in such stories as these. "But if you look in the light, you won't find it. You have to go into the darkness to find your treasure."

For quite a while now, I've been searching in the darkness of some absence of understanding to unearth a treasure that I know is in there somewhere, and I can not put my finger on it yet. I've been longing to see what

this treasure looks like in the light, and I haven't been able to do that so far. I don't know enough; I don't understand enough. Writing about it and talking to you today are certainly part of my quest, and I'll have to let you know how this particular part turns out. To oversimplify, the treasure I'm seeking to discern, to understand, to know more clearly, to bring into the light... is communion.

Don't leave. Stay with me here.

After high school, when I stopped going to church, I also stopped taking communion. For years, I did not participate in this ritual, which meant nothing to me, although I realized that it was a crucial, central element of the Christian faith. I stopped participating in it because I felt disrespectful doing something that I knew was so important to others and yet meaningless to me. I wasn't offended by it, I didn't see anything wrong with it. I just didn't value it. Years later when I entered the Presbyterian seminary, I often felt unsettled about what to do on Wednesdays at chapel. We had brief chapel services during the week, with the Wednesday services lasting a full hour and offering communion for everyone in the community. I could skip chapel on Wednesdays (which I often did) but if somebody I knew was doing the service (which was often the case), I wanted to be there. The words of invitation, I discovered, were very important to me. No surprise there, words have always been very important to me. Sometimes I could accept the invitation to the table, other times, I struggled. When the words "if you believe in Jesus" were part of the invitation, I had to have internal conversations with myself: what do they mean, believe? Sure I believe in Jesus if you mean the Jesus of history, Jesus our brother, strong and good, Jesus the rabbi, the teacher. I love the teachings of Jesus. Is that good enough? Or do I have to believe he died and came back to life? What do you mean, believe? Eventually,

the decision about taking communion came not from the silent conversations with myself, but from some deep and inexplicable need. If the need was powerful enough, I took communion. I can't say now, this many years later, if it helped back then with that need.

I still can't say today what the need is, where it comes from, that's part of what I'm trying to figure out. Here's what I can say: I'm back at the seminary now, working on Mondays and Wednesdays. Almost every Wednesday I go to chapel services, and I take communion gladly. Now, it does help to feed this deep need that I can't name.

You're still hanging with me, I see, and I'm glad you're sticking it out. I can imagine you thinking, though, "What in the world is she doing talking to a bunch of Unitarian Universalist humanists and atheists and all the rest of us about communion? About the body and blood of Jesus? I mean, really!" That's just it, though...what if the *essence* of communion is much more common than what the church has turned it into over the centuries? The words of the communion service do indeed come right out of the sacred text, *and yet* we can't ignore the fact that they are part of a larger story. The rest of the story is still there, even though it isn't incorporated into the sacrament, and it's just as ordinary and tender as any activity with people you love could be.

There's so much more to the resurrection stories than Jesus died and he came back to life, and those broader stories are a topic for another day. Today, though, here are a couple of examples. In Luke's story, two of Jesus's friends are walking along the road to Emmaus after the crucifixion, talking about what has

happened. Jesus joins them on the road, but as the text says, “their eyes were kept from recognizing him.” (Luke 24:15) He asked them what they were talking about, and they couldn’t believe he hadn’t heard. They told him all about how sad they were, about this good man whom they loved, who had just been killed and they didn’t know where his body was. It wasn’t in the tomb, and they were heartsick. When they got to the village, Jesus started to travel on, but they said to him come on and stay with us, it’s getting late.

So they sat down to share a meal with this stranger, and just as he had done before his execution, Jesus blessed the bread, broke it, and gave it to them. And in that act of offering food, they all of a sudden recognized him. Their eyes were opened, the text says. What made them recognize Jesus was that he gave them something to eat.

In John’s story, after the death of Jesus, some of Jesus’s friends were fishing early in the morning and having no luck. Jesus came along, and again they didn’t know him. He showed them a different place to cast the nets, and they made a huge catch. They built a fire to cook some of the fish, and again, they knew it was Jesus when he offered them food. In the story, the event that brought their friend and teacher back to them was not dramatic or supernatural. It was a plain, ordinary gathering with companions, eating breakfast on the beach.

A while ago someone recommended to me a book by Sara Miles called *Take This Bread*. Miles tells the story of being pulled unexpectedly into the church (in her case St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church in San Francisco) through the unlikely ritual of communion, which, in her experience, means exactly what it looks like—feeding people. Miles’s experience of communion led her to open a

food pantry at St. Gregory's, and eventually more food pantries all over San Francisco, because she believed that the ultimate Christian message does not have to be whether the man Jesus literally or figuratively died and came back to life to save us from our sins. Here's what Sara Miles says:

"I couldn't stop thinking about another story: Jesus instructing his beloved, fallible disciple Peter about exactly how to love him: 'Feed my sheep.'

Jesus asked, 'Do you love me?'

Peter fussed: 'Of course I love you.'

'Feed my sheep.'

Peter fussed some more.

'Do you love me?' asked Jesus again. 'Then feed my sheep.'

It seemed pretty clear. If I wanted to see God, I could feed people."

(Ballantine Books, *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles, p. 93)

For Sara Miles, feeding people became her religious practice. She tells about how frustrating it was, how exhausting, how much the people of the congregation resisted and gradually came to support the food pantry. Miles writes about how giving away groceries in church on Fridays caused trouble. It was dirty and loud and the floors got scuffed up. People threw trash on the sidewalks of neighbors, who complained. People tried to take more than their share and sell the extra. Scams and arguments were common occurrences among those who came for food. Yet Miles resisted any attempts to place limits on who could have food. "What are you gonna do?" she said. "It's what Jesus said...feed people." She argued that Jesus would not have asked for identification or zip codes. Jesus would not have said feed *particular* people, feed people as long as they live in this neighborhood, as long as they act nice and say

thank you, as long as they're honest. When Jesus said feed people, he didn't specify a condition upon which you decided whether or not to feed them. You had to feed the obnoxious people and the crazy people and the ones who tried to cheat and the ones who broke in line in front of others and the ones who did not do right. When Jesus said feed people, he meant everybody who needed food. In other words, everybody.

We are, ultimately, one body, everybody. Christians say we are one body in Christ. Unitarian Universalists say we are part of the interdependent web of all existence, part of the body of this earth. But all of us recognize that we exist in this fragile, difficult, exquisite life together. And all of us realize that we can't make it without food. Thus does the giving of food become a religious act. Think about it...the very first thing we give to healthy babies when they are born is food, and mothers who have nursed babies know the *literal* experience of feeding the substance of their own actual bodies to someone else. That's not an ethereal, elusive, esoteric event...it's ordinary. Centuries after the death of Jesus, the church created rules, conditions, rituals around the sacrament of communion so that only the "right" people could participate, but that was never Jesus's idea, and it's not the way the stories in the sacred text come across. The message in the stories of these sweet shared meals, both before and after Jesus's death, is one of hope. Don't forget me, Jesus told his friends, I'm still with you. They, and we, are being shown, in the words of Sara Miles, "how to re-member that which has been dis-membered by human attempts to separate and divide, judge and cast out, select or punish." (p. 77) Feed my sheep, feed all of them...simple. Common. Ordinary.

Some people who came to St. Gregory's food pantry to get groceries stayed to become regular volunteers, because they yearned to *be* fed by the act of feeding others. Sara Miles tells of occasions when someone who came needing groceries would bring a small parcel wrapped in tin foil, cooked at home, wanting to share. Wanting to feed the people who were feeding them, even though they had only a little bit. Participating somehow in the act of feeding, though, became nourishment for the soul.

Now my question is this (and if you've heard me speak often enough, you'll know that I rarely have answers, only questions): what can this approach to communion mean to Unitarian Universalists? What am I looking for, that I can often find in taking communion on Wednesdays? I am terrible at feeding people, so for me, the act of feeding means taking somebody out for coffee or a meal. I don't cook food at home, even for myself, but the most meaningful and soul searching conversations I have with people take place in coffee shops. I don't find ways of solving a problem, or coming to peace with a situation I can't solve, through thinking about it. I have to talk about it, and that talk most often happens over coffee and scones, or muffins, or cookies, or something. So although I don't actually feed people, except through buying them food, my coffee shop interactions sustain me spiritually. I think that's communion.

I think we have lost something by eliminating Christian communion from our worship. We have lost the relational element that affirms over and over again our identity as one body, and we have lost the sense of calling in the act of remembering what has been dis-membered: remember me, said Jesus, don't forget what I taught you, don't forget I love you. And we have lost something else, which I don't think I ever recognized in communion when I participated in it

the first time around: we've lost that religious imperative to *do something*...feed people, help people, make things better for those who are worse off than we are. Suppose we started serving communion in UU churches all over the world next week... Would we get those things back? I don't think so, not for generations, anyway. My purpose today is not to try to convince anyone that we should start serving communion in UU churches. In the process of creating today's worship, though, I really have been able to bring a little light to the question of why I felt so moved to talk to you about communion. I hope we can look at it in a different light, so that you can reflect on your own past experience with communion, if you have that in your past, and maybe discern something new about it. My hope is that we won't lose sight of the value and the gift of that powerful sacrament.

And so may it be.