Communion as storytime

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Our communion services look back to a cluster of specific time-bound events, Jesus' many ministry meals with his friends, with the poor, with the rich. But in particular they evoke one meal, Jesus' Passover season meal in the Upper Room. We retell the stories of the many meals and commemorate that one meal. All these meal stories shape our hospitality and our mission. The many meals help us engage with friends and neighbors and children in new ways. But that one meal, that last supper of Jesus with his disciples, evokes in us a grave gratitude, a somber joy and devoted commitment to our Lord and one another. Even more, at the Lord's table, in the company of others, we receive by a mystery beyond our grasp a holy grace of forgiveness and fellowship with the Lord himself.

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But how can retelling Jesus' table stories connect with our communion services today? How does this communal ceremonial blessing and sharing of food effect a nurture for our lives which we crave beyond our understanding? Is there a special kind of memory-keeping at work here? I contend that there is. Celebrating communion is a form of remembrance that is similar to ordinary storytelling but transcends it.

All religions tell stories, and many of them look back to a golden age, a mythical time of origins. Religious observances evoke mysterious transport to that out-of-time. But our faith doesn't involve us in time travel to Eden or a psychic journey back to the Upper Room. We live and worship squarely in our own time. However, the words and actions in the Upper Room

link directly to us and can affect our daily living. Biblical worship isn't nostalgic. It isn't mysteriously mythic. Referring faithfully to its origin stories, but rooted in the here and now, our communion directs our way forward into the future. This involves a complex interplay of time past, the here and now, and the future before us.

Signs of salvation

The late James McClendon, who has taught me much, discusses this interplay with a helpful framework, which he calls the signs of salvation.[1] These signs constitute the language by which God communicates with humanity, and by which we respond to God. Though he calls this a "rough and ready" scheme, because we can't unfailingly categorize our communication with God, McClendon proposes three types of signs.

The first type, the great historic signs, comprises the crucial events in the great history of redemption: Creation; Exodus and Sinai; the entry into Canaan-land; the birth of prophecy; exile and partial return; the Messiah's birth, redemptive life and death and resurrection; Pentecost; the mission to the gentiles.

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Associated with the historic signs are lesser signs, such as, for example, the burning bush which is a part of the Exodus story, the empty tomb which points to the resurrection of Jesus, or speaking in tongues which accompanies the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. God has "spoken" preeminently through the great historic signs.

The second type, the remembering signs, includes signs that are related to the historic signs, but not in historical time. These are the repeatable signs, which God uses with us in making contemporary connections with the once-only events of the redemption story. These remembering signs include baptism, preaching, and communion. In our baptism we recall the baptism of Jesus, his death and resurrection. In submersion we recall his overwhelming suffering, death, and burial. In affusion we recall the Spirit's outpouring at Pentecost. Preaching that retells the redemptive story is a remembering sign. In Eucharist the church

gives thanks for the poured-out life and the broken body of Jesus, and remembers his table fellowship during his ministry and after his resurrection.

The remembering signs are set in communities of faith. We act through these remembering signs, and God acts, too, to make these signs effectual. The great historic signs were for all people, but the remembering signs are more particular. They are applications of the historic signs to specific believers and faith communities now.

Though we are constrained by time, by means of the story-signs we can reach back and reach forward into God's greater time frame. So this language of story-signs pushes us beyond our human constraints of time.

Providential signs are McClendon's third type. These are instances of God's guidance and care in each Christian's life as that person finds vocation and purpose in the kingdom of God. God-given providential signs reveal Christ's footsteps, which confirm fellowship of the Spirit, and which are congruent with the qualities of discipleship as seen, for example, in the Beatitudes or the fruit of the Spirit.

This, then, is McClendon's pattern of signs, the language of interactive communication that God has provided. In order to communicate with God, we learn to speak this language of story-signs. Though constrained by time, by means of the story-signs we can reach back and reach forward into God's greater time frame. So this language of story-signs pushes us beyond our human constraints of time.

Stories shaping lives

But how does this actually work? How can stories from the past shape our lives today? Some families pass on stories and skills from one generation to the next. Children can learn their identity and devise dreams for their futures through imaginatively entering into the repeated family tales. Sometimes it happens within the larger community as well. Recently in our town Charles Nelms, a Vice President of Indiana University, delivered an inspiring speech at an NAACP-sponsored public event that marked the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. The audience listened to stories that revealed King's character—his vision, his plan, his perseverance, his focus, and his passion. In each case, Nelms admonished us to remember and to act out these vital qualities from King's life.

When we do, Nelms urged, we can prove that King did not live in vain. The way King lived can inspire and point the way ahead for others who follow.

This same function of the old stories is embedded in the Bible. Celebrative narratives of the great historic signs form the core of worship in the Old Testament, from Miriam and Moses' song and dance on the far shore of the Red Sea, to family Passover seders, to the intertwining of tragic tale and joyful song in the historical psalms. Why did they tell the old stories? So the children "should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep [God's] commandments" (Ps. 78:7). Children learned who they were, whom to trust, and how to dream their future by hearing over and over again the "things that we have heard and known, that our ancestors have told us" (Ps. 78:3).

Telling the old stories of God with Israel reminded the people what God was like. And that shaped a way to live. God listened to the cries of enslaved Israelites and liberated them. God was merciful and strict, compassionate and severe, demanding but just in his dealings with them. But it wasn't enough to recount the events. Many times the motive clause rings through the narratives: "You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this" (Deut. 24:17–8). Jesus taught in the same vein: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). And listen to Paul: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph. 4:32–5:1). The Bible's witness is that to tell the stories of God is to form our actions and affections, to show us how to live our lives.

Does this work with us today? Through rehearsing the stories of God's people, do we remember who we are and to whom we are connected? The answer is yes. We form our individual and corporate character on the character of the God whom we adore.[2] Perhaps today this biblical willingness to learn from the past seems passé. Rear-view mirrors are clouded over. People want only the latest; people read only the newest. Was Henry Ford

right when he said, "History is bunk"? Let's dispute with Ford and show a better way. Let's learn God's sign language with fluency and put those biblical motive clauses to work.

What does this all this have to do with our communion services? A great deal. Our faith consists not in fine ideals or polished philosophies. We hold to the great redemptive acts of God, and we recount and celebrate them at communion. All the story-signs—historic, remembering, and providential—play important parts at the Lord's table.

Historic signs

The events of salvation history form the frame. Through the ages the church has stubbornly insisted that the great prayer of thanksgiving at the breaking of bread must retell and give thanks for the whole sweep of God's story with us, from Creation onwards through the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. Retracing this prayer along what McClendon calls a "vector" through time, we say yes to God anew.[3] We remember God's faithfulness and mercy, God's all-embracing love and right judgments. Through our grateful prayers we pledge ourselves to become more and more like the God we praise, like Jesus in whose face we see God's face. The character of God shapes the character of God's people.

Through the ages the church has stubbornly insisted that the great prayer of thanksgiving at the breaking of bread must retell and give thanks for the whole sweep of God's story with us. This should be a prayer to span the ages, to encompass all of creation.

Consider ways to strengthen the communion table prayers. Sometimes they are temporally anemic, with a sense only of the moment at hand. Mennonites at worship seem to have difficulty staying in the mode of praise and thanksgiving. Our reflexes (humble? self-deprecating? servant-like?) make it all too easy to slip off into confession and petition. On the contrary, this should be a great prayer of blessing God, a prayer to span the ages, to encompass all of creation. We wonder anew at the marvels of the great historic signs of our God. We take the time and make the effort to do this well.

Remembering signs

McClendon marked out the classic remembering signs of baptism, preaching, and communion. These constitute a sign language for the faith community to use in remembering and realigning ourselves with the great ongoing story of God. These three should continually intertwine. Even if we don't actually do baptisms at every eucharistic service, baptismal realities underlie the profound sharing at the table, the renewed and renewing commitment to God's presence and reign. Preaching forms a channel for the Spirit to enliven Scripture and fire the conscience. In the communion service—blessing, breaking, and sharing the loaves within the forgiven and redeemed community—we receive God's gracious gifts of unity and communion with Christ and with each other. Flowing from that will be a refreshed life of service and love, reflecting the love and mercy of God in the world around us.

In our desire to avoid a morbid eucharistic piety, we are tempted to emphasize other legitimate themes of the Lord's table, while soft-pedaling their source, the mysterious efficacy of Jesus' death. But God's transforming power was unleashed at the cross. God's redeeming love is wild in our world.

The remembering sign of communion draws us to the centrality of Christ's redeeming death on the cross. Are we Mennonites wary of the subject of Christ's suffering and death? "Yes, it's that, of course," we say, and quickly move on. In our desire to avoid a morbid eucharistic piety, we are tempted to emphasize other legitimate themes of the Lord's table, such as fellowship, reconciliation, and forgiveness, while soft-pedaling their source, the mysterious efficacy of Jesus' death. But God's world-historical transforming power was unleashed at the cross. This is a power not to be tamed. God's redeeming love is wild in our world.

Listen to James MacMillan, contemporary Scottish Catholic composer, meditating on the cross and his desire to probe its meanings through his music.

> *Music can be seen as a calculus of the very face of God…. We circle around the very moments when God made his deepest interaction with human history. That is why I am drawn back obsessively to these three days*

[which climax in Easter Day]. I can't help it. I know that the answer might be there. With this form of musical calculus there is an attempt to open doors and encounter the face of God.... The face of God would be an awesome sight, if we could ever see it with human eyes. The way of finding access to that awe and fear is to experience God through the death and resurrection of his Son.[4]

A cross often hangs front and center in our meeting rooms. It is not a decoration. It evokes the central story of our faith. To be true to God's missionary story, we must keep the story of the cross central. We "proclaim Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23) and we proclaim Christ raised from the dead (1 Cor. 15:12). This proclamation is visual as we contemplate the empty cross hanging on the wall above us. It is verbal in the impassioned presentation and application of the meaning of the cross in believers' lives in the world. It is sacramental through the prophetic word and in the cup and bread of the Lord's table. And it is demonstrated communally as the Spirit enlivens and empowers Christ's gathered people. The church weaves together all the parts of the stories of redemption, and does so in the sure hope of Christ's return. The cross determines the shape of every part of the story.

How can we appreciate and mediate so great a mystery? Words can help. Over the centuries, Christians in the communion service have used cryptic acclamations or poetic hymns based on Scripture to express the mysterious kernel of our faith. I show a brief acclamation and then the same ideas in more extended form:

Christ has died.
Christ is risen.
Christ will come again.

Dying you destroyed our death;
rising you restored our life.
Lord Jesus, come in glory.

Here is an ancient assemblage of Pauline texts known liturgically as the Easter anthems (1 Cor. 5:7; 15:22; Rom. 6.9–11).

Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us
so let us celebrate the feast,
not with the old leaven of corruption and wickedness
but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Christ once raised from the dead dies no more;
death has no more domain over him.
In dying he died to sin once for all;
in living he lives to God.

See yourselves therefore as dead to sin
and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Christ has been raised from the dead,
the first fruits of those who sleep.

For as by man came death,
by man has come also the resurrection of the dead.
For as in Adam all die,
even so in Christ shall all be made alive.[5]

Teach and memorize these ancient poetic and creedal acclamations, and incorporate them, perhaps with appropriate gestures, into your communion services. It's best to "line out" the acclamations, and so avoid the distraction of printed paper. Consider singing the Easter anthems. One setting is by Mennonite pastor Andrew Kreider, who has combined the verses with this refrain, to create a spirited sending song for the close of a communion service:

We will stand up for Jesus, stand up in his Name.
And he will hold us in the power of his Spirit.
We will walk in his way.[6]

Include baptismal hymns and texts in communion services. The close connection between baptism and communion has been essential in our tradition. Too easily we give up the link in favor of a soft inclusiveness, perhaps evoking Jesus' ministry meals with doubters, sinners, and the marginalized. It is important to keep the tension we see in Jesus' ministry between open fellowship and

the discipline of his covenanted circle of disciples. What these have in common is that they are closely related types of kingdom meals, and as such require careful reflection. Can we do both at once? Maybe so, maybe not. Perhaps more frequent and more diverse types of Lord's Supper observances would be a way forward.[7]

Providential signs

We can be sure that God has been at work in the lives of congregation members, has protected and provided for them, healed and inspired them. God is alive! These are the providential signs, God's loving communication. We experience God not only through the prophetic word, and through bread and cup. We do it through the stories we recount of God's faithful and active presence. In rehearsing the providential signs, we make connections between today's faith stories and the great narratives of our faith.

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People can learn to do this by hearing others do it. For example, just as believers saved Paul's life by lowering the basket over the city wall, so someone helps save an endangered life today. Just as God provided water in wilderness, so God meets someone's desperate local need. Just as Peter sank in the waters except when he kept his eyes on the Lord, so someone testifies to failure of heart and renewed faith, in something that happened at work. Too often such life happenings are told, stripped down, as interesting anecdotes over the coffee cups. But our stories are enriched through theological, faith-building reflection.

Telling providential sign-stories could find its way into the heart of our communion worship as a thanksgiving prayer-form. Consider making an open time at the communion service to hear one another's testimonies, however simple or mundane, of God's providential signs. It would be good to hear many voices giving thanks for the Spirit's movement now, this week, today. Sitting in

rows makes this difficult. It can happen so much more easily when the people cluster around the table.

Use song and hymn responses within the communion prayers and actions. Choose and memorize particular hymns or songs. So that people don't have to handle books during the communion service, song leaders could learn to line out the hymn, unobtrusively guiding people easily through the words. Each congregation would have distinctive choices for communion hymns, ones that reflect God's providential ways with them, e.g., ones that celebrate God's faithfulness, themes of unity, forgiveness, or healing.

Communal emphases in communion

Making testimony and praying through the language of providential signs keep us firmly earthed. Today we learn how to weave our common life and worship together just as Christians of the earliest centuries had to learn to do it. They conjoined the elements of reconciled unity, prayer, and Eucharist as mainsprings of their communal life. They nurtured and disciplined these qualities at the eucharistic table which they closely monitored for access. They dismissed catechumens preparing for baptism not only before the bread and cup ceremonies, but even before the congregation's prayers and the kiss of peace, which they understood as belonging to the prayers. To participate was only for the baptized. The kiss of peace made and marked harmony both in personal relationships and in prayer. Unity in fellowship and in prayer were as much a part of the "sacrifice" of the service as was partaking of the elements of bread and cup. Coherence in these elements of reconciliation, prayer, and Eucharist can profoundly shape the whole community just as much for us now as for Christians two millennia ago.

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A strength of our Anabaptist tradition has been to assert that we can't deal with spirituality without dealing with economics.

They are interconnected. We have maintained the strong theme of mutual aid, of pledging to one another tough solidarity, everyday help and sustenance. A beautiful historical case exists in Balthasar Hubmaier's Pledge of Love, which exemplifies mutual, self-giving love in the context of the communion service.[8] As John Rempel has perceptively noted, for Hubmaier "the supper is not a devotional contemplation of the crucifixion of Christ. It is an ethical summons to imitate Jesus' surpassing act of self-giving. Just as Jesus offered himself for me, I offer myself for others."[9]

Christ is present in the Spirit among his people gathered at the table. Through the loving energy of the Spirit we renew our promises to love one another, to reach out to the stranger and to the enemy. In preparing for a communion service, draw on Hubmaier's Pledge of Love, or use the insights of Hans de Ries, a seventeenth-century Mennonite, in a communion service prepared by John Rempel.[10]

Time to come

The Lord's Supper is about many things: giving thanks, forgiveness, and solidarity with Christ and one another. But there is more. The supper is sometimes called the banquet of the kingdom, a foretaste of the great feast. At the Lord's Supper we celebrate God's future breaking into our time.

In the Gospels, the passion narratives, of which the Last Supper is a significant part, are woven through with Jesus' teachings about last things. Notice how the "little apocalypse" of Mark 13 is followed by the Last Supper account. The final crisis, the last judgment, and the Last Supper are parts of one meaningful whole. The church's supper looks back to Passover, to the Upper Room, but it also looks forward. In Mark this emphasis is especially strong. God's reign is breaking into now. The future is already here. The Lord's (church's) Supper is the supper of the kingdom. To conclude a communion service, sing a hymn on the theme of the coming reign of God such as "You are salt for the earth, O people" (*Hymnal: A Worship Book,* #226).

In the Lord's Supper we have the richest form of worship. Where else in a church's life is there anything so amazing? In a hymn-sing, or a lecture hour, in Sunday school or coffee time? So why do we settle for such infrequent observance of the Lord's

Supper? We probably have lots of good reasons: missional sensitivities, relational concerns, the complexity of our communion ceremonies. Perhaps the kind of eucharistic fellowship we crave is simply impossible in big buildings and large congregations. Size is a significant factor. The Christian faith is best lived out with the daily support of brothers and sisters; with a face-to-face group who know our stories and whose stories we know; with full-bodied eucharistic worship that sings, whispers, weeps, and shouts in God's sign language of reconciling love. It may be that smaller numbers are better, in order for a congregation to exercise the fullest eucharistic fellowship.

I am convinced that we find no greater, deeper, richer vein of spiritual nurture than at the Lord's table. The Lord invites us to his table, so let us respond; let us come often to his table. And as we turn outward from the table we will discover that others are waiting. They are longing for time-transcending worship, for deep-dish spiritual nurture, for the sustaining joy and faithful solidarity of Jesus' own people living by the story we tell.

Notes

[1] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Pr., 1994), 374–416.

[2] This is the overarching theme of Eleanor Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character* (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1997).

[3] McClendon, *Doctrine*, 376. A dictionary definition of vector: a directed quantity, as a straight line in space, involving both direction and magnitude.

[4] James MacMillan, "God, Theology and Music," *New Blackfriars* 81 (January 2000): 22; also to appear in Alan Kreider and Stephen Darlington, eds., *Composing Music for Worship in the Third Christian Millennium* (forthcoming).

[5] *The Alternative Service Book 1980* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Pr., 1980), 74–5.

[6] Musical setting available from Andrew Kreider, 1726 Roys Avenue, Elkhart IN 46516 USA. Copyright © 1988.

[7] See Kreider, "A Community of Many Tables," chap. 15 in *Communion Shapes Character*, 189–95.

[8] See "A Form for Christ's Supper" (1527) in *Balthasar Hubmaier, Theologian of Anabaptism*, Classics of the Radical Reformation, vol. 5, trans. and ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1989), 393–408. A form of the Pledge of Love prepared for congregational use appears in Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 278–81.

[9] John D. Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, no. 33 (Waterloo and Scottdale: Herald Pr., 1993), 48.

[10] This service, prepared by John D. Rempel, appears in Kreider, *Communion Shapes Character*, 282–5.