

## What Do You Bring to the Table?

The Reverend Peter Cook  
 Sunday, January 6, 2013  
 The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ  
 Burlington, Vermont

### Matthew 2:1-12

*2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" 7Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."*

*9When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

The three magi came to the manger to meet Christ. They traveled a very long way bearing their gifts. They brought to the manger all their hopes and dreams for what this Christ would mean to their lives. They, of course, like all of us had a history which shaped their likes, dislikes and perceptions. But they came to the manger expecting that something magical and something new was about to be born in their hearts. Much as was the case at the manger, we come to this communion table to meet Christ in all of his wonder and fullness. At this table, we embrace Christ not in a rigid and one dimensional way. Instead, through the telling of his story and the sharing of the bread and cup, we participate in the whole story from the beginnings of creation and the law and prophets in which Christ was steeped. We then go on to share in Christ's birth, ministry, his death, his resurrection and his coming again, and the witness of the Holy Spirit through the centuries up to the present moment. Much like those magi, we bring to this table our unique perspectives and our whole history. We bring good experiences with religion and experiences which are not so great. We bring lots of opinions. We hope that the celebration in which we participate will acknowledge those struggles, hopes and dreams but, at the same time, I think we hope that we will participate in something new all together.

In the United Church of Christ, we are so deeply devoted to the idea that we shall all be one in Christ. You know the motto from the Gospel of John "that they shall all be one". That means that, at this table, you will find a little Baptist, a little Roman Catholic, a little Orthodox, a little free church Protestant, a little Congregationalist, a little Episcopal, and a little Presbyterian. And it all gets woven into a wonderful ecumenical tapestry which is so central to who we are as

an ecumenical church in the United Church of Christ. More than any other entity in all of Christendom, we are convinced that denominationalism, while having some things to commend it, is basically a scandal which can shield us from appreciating our brother and sisters in Christ with the most charitable eyes. We all have stories and histories as we come to the table that are somewhat different. In this way, I would offer my own personal journey.

I grew up in a Congregational church where communion was celebrated quite infrequently. Communion, much to my distress, was not something in which I participated regularly as a child or as a teenager. Worship was very adult oriented. With time, I came to see that the Congregationalist Church had a certain smugness where we only thought of communion as an act of penitence focusing on the last supper on the night before Christ died. We thought communion could only be somber because the last supper had a somber feel on the eve of Christ's death as the tragic politics of the ancient world became too thick. It was to be a very simple meal focused primarily on the elements.

Layered into this somber last supper communion was a distinct anti-Catholicism and a hostility to anything that was perceived to be other than Congregationalist even though we really did not know much about what Congregationalism was all about either. Moreover, the whole ecumenical conversation about communion seemed to pass us by. In seminary, my narrow Congregationalist world was opened up as I had the privilege of studying not just with Protestants from many traditions, but with three groups of Roman Catholics--the Dominicans, the Franciscans and the Jesuits. I learned that all these differences which were trumpeted in my upbringing were more like a bag of uninformed prejudices which did not reflect a serious engagement with the Christian tradition or the biblical accounts. Communion, for Protestants, I came to understand, often was more of reaction to medieval Catholicism which had been somewhat abandoned by Roman Catholics themselves. We were stuck in an old fight.

Along with my fellow Roman Catholics seminarians, I learned that through Vatican II, the Catholic Church was engaged in an exciting and amazing renaissance to uncover the liturgical riches of the early church. The early church was long thought to be the scholarly expertise of Protestants and not so much Catholics. And yet, I saw vividly how Catholic's opened up the trunk which the Protestants had long closed, and took another look and found something very different from the well traveled assumptions that Protestants had asserted about the early church for so long.

Happily, in the process, many Protestant scholars, from a variety denominations, shared in the excitement of Vatican II and followed suit including the United Church of Christ. We revisited our communion services to reflect a fuller celebration of the life of Christ. Much to their delight, Protestants discovered that Roman Catholics unearthed riches from the early church which were over looked. This inquiry was so consistent with the ecumenical spirit of the church. Perhaps one of the most noticeable discoveries was that these early communion practices varied quite a bit and that, while there was some emphasis on penitence, there was an equal emphasis on celebrating the joy of resurrection. Yes it was about finding Christ at the last supper but it was also about finding the resurrected Christ in the breaking of the bread on the road to Emmaus. Communion subsequently had both a somber and a celebratory quality to it.

Protestants, however, also brought another insight to the celebration of communion which Roman Catholics had ignored for a long time and were just starting to discover. The Protestant critique of Roman Catholics was that for too long they were obsessed with whether the bread and wine would be the actual of body and blood of Christ. A focus on the elements made it feel like they were the sole possession of the priest to the exclusion of the community.

For Protestants, especially those influenced by Calvin and Zwingli, we began to reassert that the real presence of Christ is not so much found in the elements themselves but in the sharing of those elements with one other. Hence the structure of the communion prayers was less focused on the minister or priest. Instead, the focus was to be on inviting everybody to participate in the communion prayer and song so that it could become their own. Christ was not just on the table but more appropriately dwelled in the congregation. Roman Catholics still believe in the presence of Christ in the elements but some Roman Catholic scholars like Edward Schillebeeckx also spoke of transubstantiation or real presence in the celebrating community. Protestants don't so much get focused on the elements turning into the body and blood of Christ. We are, however, recovering our reformation emphasis on the shared nature of what we do in the celebration of communion.

Coming to the present time, as a pastor in the United Church of Christ, it is such a privilege to welcome people into our church from all sorts of traditions including our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. I grieve with you the distortions and excesses found in all of our traditions under which we have needlessly suffered. I share with many Roman Catholics their distress that the Roman Catholic hierarchy seems to be moving away from Vatican II. It's distressing to many Roman Catholics that the current pope seems to be abandoning the inclusive and ecumenical aspects of Vatican Two and Roman Catholic tradition and make communion and many more aspects of the church more priest focused at the expense of the celebrating community. Catholic social teaching particularly around marriage and sexuality is becoming more and more regressive by the month. But Protestants also have things to grieve. Many Protestants have seen the incredible riches of the Christian tradition reduced to a shrill and fundamentalist reading of the Bible. Others Protestants have labored under a skimpy Christianity which looks like a thin gruel of musical, theological, and worship gimmicks based solely on what's happening now. In every tradition, we have our issues. So during the course of our ministry together you will discover some patterns around this table which seem quite regular, quite historical, quite tradition based.

The regular parts move us towards a basic ecumenical structure shared by both Protestants and Catholics in touch with the practice of the early church, which looks quite close to what you will find in our hymnals. Take a look. What we find there is an ecumenical form for communion. Some might think that it looks a lot like what we will find in the Roman Catholic Church or the Episcopal Church but, in fact, this form, with a few variations, is commonly found in Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Christian Church worship books as a normative pattern along with the United Church of Christ Book of Worship. And yet there is also room for some change and innovation so that Jesus is made known and reshaped for our own time. So we will vary somewhat from these worship forms which embraces our appreciation for new approaches and interpretations which is a strength for Protestants.

There is so much more I want to say and could say about communion and what we do around this table. Over the next many years we will uncover those riches together through sermons, study, and, of course, the actual practice of sharing in communion. We will celebrate in many ways. But however we celebrate, it's my wish that our congregation can come to love the gifts that every single person in the sanctuary brings to the table. I want us to have some openness to knitting those gifts together in a marvelous tapestry which helps us know the fullness of Christ. This is a journey we share together. So like those Magi, come to the manger or this table bringing the gift of your whole person, your hopes, opinions, traditions, first loves and dreams. Let us eat and drink together and seek to become a new creation in Christ all together. Amen.