

The Elements We Have Around Us

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas
October 4, 2020 (World Communion Sunday)
Exodus 12:14-17; Matthew 26:17-19, 26-29

Last spring, as First Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where we are members, was adjusting to virtual worship, our pastor appeared on the computer screen, sitting casually in front of the fireplace in the breezeway of her home. You could hear birds chirping and her children playing in the background.

She reminded us that later in the service we would observe the Lord's Supper virtually for the first time. Recognizing that we would not likely have the necessary elements on hand, she suggested that we use "what elements you have around you."

I was an enthusiastic participant in the "creative worship" movement back in the day. Buddy and Louise Powell were in the college group at First Baptist Church, Waco, where I was the minister to students. They probably remember the college worship service. Ask them about the "burning urn."

But as I have grown older, I have become more appreciative of ritual and tradition. Scrounging through our kitchen in search of something to substitute for the bread and the cup as our pastor suggested struck me as, well, trendy.

After all, according to Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus was crucified on Passover, and the meal he shared with his disciples was the Passover meal. For a thousand years the elements had had symbolic significance for Jews, recalling God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt. You couldn't substitute for the bread and the wine with, say, goat's milk and whatever you found in the fridge.

So, the bread and the cup became the elements of the Lord's Supper, no longer representing the liberation of Israel from Egypt but the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus.

I want to share a secret. At some point in the church's history, someone or a group of someones decided that if there is more than one version of something in the Bible and the differences are significant, they would pick one and not tell you about the other. They figured that you don't read the Bible, so who would know.

While it is true that Matthew, Mark and Luke say that the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples was the Passover meal and that the meal became the model for the Lord's Supper, John's Gospel said that Jesus died the day before Passover. So, if they had supper together that night, it couldn't have been the Passover meal, and if they had bread and wine, it was just what they were going to have for dinner. It was what elements they had around them.

Nonetheless, the church opted for Matthew, Mark and Luke's version, which raised some practical issues.

For example, how often should we observe the Lord's Supper? Passover was an annual observance. Should the Lord's Supper be observed only once a year? The church decided that wasn't often enough. Some churches opted for every week. Others decided that they would observe the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of the month. Still others settled on once every three months, for reasons I have never known.

Another question: How much of the Passover ritual should we replicate? The ceremony as outlined in the book of Exodus and as practiced by Jews today in the Seder

meal included roasted lamb and bitter herbs along with unleavened bread. You may have noticed that we don't serve lamb with the Lord's Supper. Clearly, the church decided that unleavened bread would be sufficient.

Did the bread have to be unleavened? In the Jewish ritual it had to be unleavened in order to connect with the historical narrative. The flight of the Israelites from Egypt was so abrupt that, according to the ancient story, "*They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt; it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait.*" (Exodus 12:39) For Passover the bread had to be unleavened.

The church decided that in the Christian adaptation there was no reason that bread had to be unleavened. It would be optional. Some denominations opted for paper-thin round wafers; others went with tiny squares wafers so many churches use. Still others opted for loaves of yeast-risen bread that could ceremoniously be broken in the observance of the Lord's Supper.

You see how far we have already come from a mere duplication of an ancient Jewish ritual.

What about the cup? You can see where this is going. Did the cup have to be alcoholic? Would grape juice work? Baptists decided that you had to draw the line on literalism somewhere and this was it. Welch's Grape Juice was fine. After all, Rev. Thomas Welch invented it for just that purpose. Which leads me back to my narrative.

When our pastor encouraged us to find "what elements you have around you" to substitute for the bread and grape juice, I hurried to the refrigerator in search of a liquid suitable to pass for the cup and found to my consternation only a gallon of 1% milk, some orange juice and back in the corner a quart of buttermilk. Nothing remotely suggestive of the wine Jesus served his disciples.

I closed the refrigerator, fearing that for lack of proactive shopping I might become merely an observer at our first virtual Lord's Supper. That is when I saw on the counter next to the refrigerator a bottle of Napa Valley's finest.

I was reared, as I am sure many of you were, in a conservative Baptist church where I was taught that the world was created in six 24-hour days because Genesis said so and that if the Bible said that an ass talked and an ax-head floated, by golly, an ass talked and an ax-head floated. The Bible was to be interpreted in its most literal sense. Except where alcohol was concerned.

The wine Jesus provided at the wedding at Cana was nonalcoholic, I was told. He turned the water into wine on the spot; it didn't have time to ferment. Following our Lord's example, we were not to imbibe anything alcoholic – ever. Using real wine in the Lord's Supper would have been unthinkable if we ever thought about it, which we never did.

So, there I stood in my kitchen staring at a bottle of red wine, a retired pastor who had never observed the Lord's Supper in a Baptist church with fermented fruit of the vine.

A slight tinge of guilt came over me at the mere thought of it. Not guilt that leads to repentance; more like guilt that causes one to feel slightly naughty.

And so it was that on that Sunday last spring we joined fellow church members at the Lord's Table, a community gathered in a hundred homes throughout the city, our household observing the Lord's Supper with a dark red blend from California and

leftover bread from a take-out meal ordered the day before from a nearby Greek restaurant that we are supporting during the plague that besets us.

In telling the story as I have, I am struck by how silly it all sounds.

Paul put the Lord's Supper in its simplest, most serious terms: "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (I Corinthians 11:26) Plainly and simply, the Lord's Supper is about the death of Jesus.

Whatever you believe about the death of Jesus, it was at bare minimum a religion-inspired, state-sponsored execution of an innocent man, a man whose Way threatened all the wrong people; a man who would not back down, who resolutely "set his face toward Jerusalem" (Luke 9:53), knowing full-well what was in store for him; a man whose followers claim to this day that he offers a unique window into the very being of God and the nature of being authentically human and whose death brought redemption to those who follow his Way.

Today Christians around the world will gather at the Lord's Table. Some will call it the Lord's Supper, some will call it the eucharist, some will call it communion. Some will drink wine; others will drink grape juice. Some will eat unleavened bread; others will eat bread that has been leavened. One thing will be constant: in hundreds of languages these words will be said: "This is my body which is given for you. This is my blood which is shed for you."

This morning we gather virtually -- you separated from friends who live across town; you and I separated by more than a thousand miles. We gather to remember the sacrifice and the obedience to the will of God of the One by whose name we are called and in whose name we gather. We do so, each in our own homes and in our own way, by making the ordinary things of our lives -- what we eat and drink -- bearers of the holy, making holy the elements we have around us. Amen.