

Meeting God at the Table

A pastor reflects
on holy encounters
through the
sacrament of
communion.

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LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

I first met Wayne and Edith Cook when they were living in a townhouse on the north side of Lincoln, Nebraska. They had been retired for a long time, after having served Covenant churches in the Midwest. Already in failing health when I met them, Edith soon began to slip into the fog of Alzheimer's. It wasn't long before Wayne was unable to care for her and she moved to a nursing home. Within a year Wayne's health also declined and he joined her. I had the privilege of visiting them there, sharing memories and stories with Wayne, and praying with them.

During the last year of her life Edith was not able to respond to very much that was happening around her. So when I went to see her I was puzzled about what I could do that would be helpful and would have some meaning. I wondered if she even knew who I was or why I was there.

Eventually, I decided to try singing to her. When she was younger, she had been a talented musician and she loved Christian music. For several years when they were working in a church in Minneapolis she had her own Christian music radio program.

When I visited, I would say hello, then ask if she would like to sing a song. Even if she did not respond I would begin singing one of the old hymns: "Day by Day," "Children of the Heavenly Father," and others. Her face would soften and perhaps just a little bit of a smile would form in the corners of her mouth. I don't know if I chose her favorite songs, but at least she seemed to remember the music and words, and they brought her some measure of joy.

I was glad to share with Edith the presence of God in those brief moments. But there was another kind of meeting with God that, I believe, was even more important. Sometimes I brought along my portable communion set.

Inviting Edith to share with me at the Lord's table, I would open the kit and place it on her bed stand where

she could see it. Then with a prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of Jesus and God's grace and hope, I would read the brief service for Holy Communion and share the bread and the cup with her.

In those few moments at the table in her nursing home room Edith came alive. She was unable to speak, but her eyes told me she knew what was happening. With my help she ate the piece of bread and sipped the cup with eyes bright with recognition and sometimes with a tear trickling down her cheek. Something was happening deep in her soul. She knew that in the eating and the sipping God was with her, and God was telling her that she was loved and

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forgiven and welcomed into his eternal family.

This was not ordinary eating and drinking, it was not even like any other time of meeting with God. This was the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Not long after my last visit with her, Edith left this life for the complete eternal life of heaven. We placed her body in a grave near Mead, Nebraska, celebrating her life in Christ and rejoicing in her home going.

MAGADAN, RUSSIA

In the fall of 1998 I had the privilege of going on a teaching mission in Magadan, a port city in far northeastern Russia. Covenant World Mission was helping a small, struggling Bible school continue its work by supplying some financial support and sending teachers from the U.S. on two-week rotations. Each teacher led one class for two weeks, teaching forty hours each week. It was a great joy to teach the Bible intensively to a small group of students whose ages ranged from eighteen to fifty-five and whose experience with Jesus ranged from a few months to decades of faithfulness under persecution.

On the second Sunday I was there, I was invited to worship with the church

that hosted the Bible school and to offer one of two sermons that morning. I wondered what I would say to a group of believers who knew far more than I would ever know about living for Jesus in the face of great difficulty and persecution. I remember feeling very inadequate and very humbled. How could I connect with these believers who were from another culture, another world of experience? How could we know each other as sisters and brothers in God's family? After much singing and a sermon by Pastor Olga, I tried to say something that would have meaning to my fellow believers.

And then came the surprise. At the

point when I thought the long service was ending, the congregation began to sing a Russian translation of "The Old Rugged Cross." Two men brought forward trays for Holy Communion. I couldn't tell for sure what was said as the bread was broken and the cup poured, but I believe it was from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26: "The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also...."

A few moments later I was receiving the bread and the cup from Russian believers while they sang of the cross and of God's love and forgiveness. Tears of joy trickled down my cheeks. There I was thousands of miles from home, in a place very strange to me, worshiping with people I had only recently met and listening to them sing in a language I did not know. And yet, I knew I was bonded to them and they to me. I knew that we were one in Christ at the table of our Lord.

We took our pieces of hard, dark bread and munched on them. We took our cups of juice and sipped them

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carefully. And we knew that Jesus was present with us, speaking to us of his suffering and death, his broken body and the blood he shed, of his sacrifice on our behalf. In those few moments of cross-cultural worship I knew that Jesus was present with his people, making two languages and cultures one in his love and hope.

Those few moments in Magadan were precious and holy; they were a celebration of the sacrament of Holy Communion.

A LIFE-GIVING MEETING

During several years of my young adulthood I was part of a church in which there seemed to be an unspoken fear of making the celebration of Holy Communion too important. Perhaps reacting against worship practices in which communion is so wrapped in ceremony and tradition that it becomes not merely mystical but magical, the church leaders seemed reluctant to invite us to the table. Instead, communion was quickly and abruptly tacked on to the end of a service. There was little opportunity to pray, to reflect, to confess and be forgiven, or to hear Jesus say, “This is my body which is for you.... This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”

Over the years I have sat at the table of our Lord many times in settings as varied as a nursing home in Nebraska and a Bible school in Russia. I have come to know those moments as priceless, life-giving meetings with the Lord and a deep connection with sisters and brothers in the family of God. We eat the bread and sip the cup knowing we are sharing in the sacrament of Holy Communion only by God’s unbounded grace and love.

Now I eagerly look forward to hearing the invitation, “Come to this table not because you must but because you may,” and to meeting God there. And one day we will gather at the great eternal banquet table, and we will know that our experience of God’s love and grace on earth was only a taste of the feast he is preparing for his people. □