

“Before you leave, could you bake a few loaves of bread, bless them, and put them in the freezer, so we can have communion after you’re gone? How long does it keep?”

This question, asked without guile by a member of one of my churches, felt to me like some kind of trick question on an ordination exam. She was asking the associate pastor, who was the Sunday morning pastor for her congregation and who would soon be moving on to a new appointment, if he could bless some communion bread and leave it behind before he left. The congregation didn’t yet know who their next pastor would be. The typical United Methodist start date of July 1 was only a few short weeks away. In the midst of all the usual anxiety and anticipation of a pastoral transition, heightened by the unusual uncertainty of not yet knowing who would be appointed so late in the game, she just wanted to know that her church would be able to continue to gather around the Lord’s Table.

I was grateful that my District Superintendent was in the room, so I didn’t need to try and unpack the complexities of her question in the moment. He simply reassured her that her church would receive a pastor, and that someone would be available to preside at communion, even if it turned out that they were without a pastor for a while. But the questions implicit and explicit in hers have stuck with me, and I wonder about all they mean for pastors like you and me.

As it turns out, an appointment was made by July 1. But even with a properly appointed preacher in the pulpit, the sacramental situation has remained complicated. The newly appointed pastor is, technically, a lay person. He’s felt a call to pastoral ministry, and that call has been affirmed by his congregation and the relevant district committee. But he’s just setting out on the long (and often winding) path to ordination or licensing in our denomination, and it will be a little while at least before he has the official United Methodist authority to preside at the sacraments.

So the solution directed by our Superintendent, for now, is that I – an ordained elder and the lead pastor of our three-point charge – will preside at communion, but from a distance. Gathered with a small number of people, usually late on a Saturday afternoon, I bless some bread and juice, and we share in a holy meal. Those elements are then brought to this smaller congregation, where the associate pastor distributes them during Sunday morning services. The theological boundaries around presiding at holy communion are maintained, and this small congregation served by a faithful lay preacher is able to receive the sacrament during their Sunday morning worship.

The truth is, I think this arrangement is far from ideal. What has struck me as we have begun sharing in communion in this way (and this is still a new arrangement for me, for the associate pastor, and for my congregations) is how strange it feels. I do not like “pre-blessing” the communion elements, leaving them in Ziplock baggies to be shared by a group of people that will gather for worship without me. I miss the chance to place a little piece of bread in each person’s hand, looking them in the eye as I tell them, “This is the body of Christ, the bread of life, for *you*.” It feels wrong to divorce my ordination vows to faithfully administer the sacraments from all the other vows: to lead the people of God in worship and prayer, to exercise pastoral supervision, to counsel the troubled,

and declare the forgiveness of sin, to name just a few. It seems to me that this whole arrangement has been devised as a practical solution (have an elder pre-consecrate the communion elements) to a practical problem (the difficulty of finding clergy to serve every congregation, particularly those congregations looking for a less-than-full-time pastor).

The reality of congregational ministry is that we pastors often find ourselves pushed into practical arrangements, and are left (sometimes on our own) to mine our circumstances for theological truths, to look carefully for the presence of God even when we find ourselves in places we did not expect to be or settings that are, in any number of ways, far from ideal. Part of our practice of ministry is to allow our theology to shape and be shaped by the practice of ministry. Theology is always more complicated in the middle of actual ministry than it is in the seminary classroom (and God knows it's complicated enough there). This is where I find myself, in the middle of this complicated communion arrangement: wondering where the real presence of God is being felt and known, even in my uneasiness about my role in blessing the bread and cup for another congregation to share in my absence.

I can't help but think of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. They were on a road they never expected to walk. Jesus – the one they hoped would redeem Israel – had been handed over and crucified. Their friend and teacher, rabbi and messiah, had died, and they were grieving. Then they had received strange news of an empty tomb and angels announcing Jesus is alive. They had heard accounts that his body wasn't there, but they hadn't seen it for themselves. They were confused and uncertain about what was going on and what might happen next. It's a complicated moment for them, when a stranger appears who doesn't know anything about all these things that have taken place (has he been living under a rock?).

So they explain the situation, tell this stranger all about Jesus. And when they all finally get to Emmaus, they invite him to stay for supper. And that's when it happens: "he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Luke 24:30-31 CEB). In this echo of the last meal they had shared with Jesus before all these things, they suddenly realize that he is there with them, the real presence of God, somehow alive and – best of all – right there with them, even after all these things that have taken place, even when they didn't recognize him at first.

This is part of the beauty of holy communion, isn't it? It is an ordinary means of grace. In the retelling and remembering and reenacting that one meal where Christ was at the table with his disciples, we know that Christ is at the table with us. Even if we've been walking along uncertain roads or wondering where he might have gone, the promise of the sacrament is that he is here, and he has been here even if we couldn't see or didn't realize. In the breaking of the bread, we recognize his presence. Even if that breaking happens on a Saturday afternoon with just a few others; even if the retelling and remembering and reenacting happens the next morning under the careful leadership of a lay preacher; even if we are uneasy or uncomfortable or uncertain that this is the "right" way to do things. In the breaking and sharing of the bread, we recognize him.

It's not that the bread is somehow imparted with a special kind of holiness when I gather with a few people and we pray over it together. The real presence of God can't be stored in a Ziplock baggie for use at some unspecified future date; isn't the promise of the resurrection that Jesus' body is no longer bound to a particular place or time, not a sealed-off tomb nor a frosty church freezer?

But if Jesus is walking with us, and if he wants to be known to us – both “ifs” that I have to believe are truths – then what I am learning and experiencing is that I and my associate pastor and my congregation *can* recognize him around the table. Even in the strangeness and discomfort of blessing the bread and cup with only a few other people, I sense a special kind of holiness. Even though I don't get to look the congregation in the eye and place the bread in their hands, a lay pastor who knows them and loves them does get to care for them in that way. After all, if Jesus can disappear in the middle of the meal and trust that his love for his disciples would be no less real to them, can't I trust this congregation to sense my care for them and – even better – to experience Jesus' care for them when they receive the bread and cup? Even though it is an arrangement in which I never expected to find myself, and even though (importantly) it is still not the arrangement I would prefer, I have to admit: I sense God's presence in it, and I know the congregation does, too.

That's the best part of the work we do as pastors, isn't it? We are the ones who look for God's presence and point it out to the people we've been called to serve. We're the ones who stand behind the table and announce the good news that – somehow, some way – Jesus is present here. Sometimes we're even the ones who leave a broken loaf of bread in a church kitchen for someone else to pick up and share the next day, trusting that it will be a means of grace for people we cannot see and do not know. We're the ones who get to wrestle with the theological meaning of practical problems, and find ourselves surprised at the grace we find.