

*Manna: What is It?*

“What is it?” That’s what the Israelites in the Wilderness said the first time they saw the fine, flaky, frost-like stuff on the ground that God had given them to eat. They had never seen anything like it before, so they asked the natural question, “What is it?” Moses explained to them that it was the bread God was providing to satisfy their hunger. They called it *manna* which sounds like the Hebrew words for “What is it?”

That question, “What is it?” persists. Over the years people have tried to figure out exactly what the manna might have been. For a while it was widely believed that the manna was the resin of a certain plant native to the area. Then it was decided that manna was the secretion of a particular insect common to that place. Someone has even recently suggested that the manna could have been a mushroom, a mushroom with psychedelic properties, which the Israelites ate, and that is what gave them their experience of God.

I don’t know why some people think it’s so important to find natural explanations for the miracles of the Bible. If God rained down bread from heaven, that’s a miracle. And if God ordained that a certain plant or insect, or even a fungi, should feed his people... well, that’s a miracle too. Theories of how miracles happen change frequently, but the deeper meaning of this manna miracle remains consistent over time. Namely, it tells us that God loves his people and provides nourishment for them.

In the Holy Communion we celebrate, God shows his love for us and provides for our spiritual nourishment with another kind of heavenly bread. Did you ever wonder how our celebration of Holy Communion might look to someone who has never attended a Christian church before? If complete outsiders were to watch us celebrate the Lord's Supper, might they ask, "What is it?" The reverent care we use in handling the bread and wine, and the Christian jargon we use in speaking about the Lord's body and blood, would certainly hint that something special, something important, was going on here. But exactly what is it? The scripture readings assigned for today suggest that this might be a good Sunday to consider a bit what Christ and the Bible say, that is, what we believe and teach, about Holy Communion.

Readings from the Gospel According to Saint John, the sixth chapter, were assigned for last Sunday, and this Sunday, and also for the next three weeks to come. These readings make up what is known as "The Bread of Life Discourse" in John's gospel. Here Jesus explains at length what it means to eat his body and drink his blood. It's interesting to note that we don't have the "Institution of the Lord's Supper" in John's gospel the way we have it in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. In those three gospels we have the familiar story of the Last Supper, with Jesus at the Passover meal with his disciples, on the night in which he was betrayed, where he took, blessed, broke, and shared the bread, and again after supper the wine, which he identified as his body and blood. In John's gospel we get a very different perspective.

In John's gospel Jesus washes the disciples' feet at the beginning of the Last Supper. After Judas the Betrayer leaves, Jesus gives them the commandment to love one another, which is what the foot washing

symbolized. Then at dinner Jesus launches into a lengthy speech and prayer, revealing his purposes and plans. At no time in John's gospel does Jesus institute the Lord's Supper as he does in the other gospels. But Jesus does give a deep and profound commentary on exactly what Holy Communion is and means in his discourse in John chapter six. What principles have we drawn out of what Jesus had to say?

Jesus makes several statements such as "I am the Bread of Life" and "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." Statements such as these, coupled with the what we hear Jesus say in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, "This is my body... This is my blood," lead us to conclude that the bread and the wine of the Holy Communion are really, truly Jesus' own body and blood. How can that be so? As I always tell my First Communion classes, if we put the bread and wine under a microscope we will not epithelial cells (skin cells) or red and white blood cells. This is another miracle that defies natural explanation, and philosophic explanation as well. We don't talk about transubstantiation or consubstantiation. We just take Jesus at his word and we don't try to explain the mechanism of his presence. We merely rejoice that Christ is, as Luther said, "In, under and above" the bread and wine.

How often should we receive Jesus, as he is present in the Holy Communion? At one time many Lutheran churches would have Communion just once a month or even only once a quarter. Like many Lutheran churches today, we here at The Good Shepherd celebrate Holy Communion every week. Why the change? From the days of the Apostles until beyond the time of Martin Luther, celebrating Communion at every

worship service was the norm. But warfare in Europe made clergy scarce, and clergy were even more scarce on the American frontier. So Lutherans, like many Protestants, got away from weekly Communion, not for any good theological reason, and not as a Protest against Rome, but just because of circumstances. Jesus tells us how important our relationship to him is, and we want to support and nourish that relationship by eating and drinking his sacramental body and blood. So we offer Holy Communion here each week, not to be more like any other church, but so that anyone who needs the comfort and encouragement the Holy Communion gives can receive it right here whenever he or she needs it.

Who can receive Holy Communion? Where we have come down on that question is to say all the baptized can receive Holy Communion here. I have a lot of respect for those who practice closed, or close, Communion, meaning only members of a certain denomination can receive Communion in their churches. The reasoning behind closed Communion is that receiving Holy Communion together is seen to imply doctrinal unity, which actually does not exist among all Christians. I must confess that I myself am not 100% comfortable in sharing Holy Communion with anyone who denies the Real Presence, baptized or not.

Yet, so that we are not in a position of judging others' faith, we accept that the invitation to the sacrament comes from Christ himself. The bread and the wine are Christ's body and blood whether or not the person receiving them believes it or not. Christ's presence comes through the power of the Word and the Holy Spirit; it is not our faith or knowledge that manipulates

Christ's presence. Those who receive the sacrament in faith receive its benefits; those who mock it, take it their judgment.

There is much more we could say about the Holy Communion. For instance, the type of bread used at the Holy Communion is immaterial as long as it is real bread made with wheat. The bread could be wafers, or pita, or matzo, or whole loaf bread. We like to use whole loaf bread here because it looks more like what we think real bread looks like, and we like the symbolism of us all eating from the very same loaf. In a similar way, the wine can be white or red or blush, as long as it is real grape wine. We use a pouring chalice because, again, it preserves the symbol of all of us drinking from the same cup. After all, we are one.

Different people have different customs regarding how they receive Holy Communion and that's fine. We come from many different churches and traditions, but Christ has made us all one. Luther said the most important thing in receiving Holy Communion is to believe that it is given for you.

Christ died for you. Christ rose for you. Christ will come again for you. In the meanwhile, Christ gives himself in the sacrament for you, that your sins might be forgiven, that your faith might be strengthened, and that you might experience Jesus just a little here as you will fully in heaven.

So, "What is it?" That's what it is. Amen.