

Our family has a tradition when we go out for Asian food. When the server brings the check and the fortune cookies, we don't just reach in and take a cookie. Rather, we give the cookies to one another. For instance, if Jesse and I go to *Hang On* for lunch, when the check and cookies are brought to the table, I pick a fortune cookie up off the tray and hand it to Jesse and Jesse picks a fortune cookie up off the tray and hands it to me. I can't remember where or when the tradition started, but I like it. While I joke that the fortune won't come true if it's in a cookie that you just took off the tray for yourself, the truth is that I like the idea of receiving a cookie, of making the fortune cookie part of the meal something a little bit special. In the case of the fortune cookies, 'tis far better to receive than it is to take. After all, it's not very special to just grab it and eat it like it's any old cookie. Our family ritual of serving each other the fortune cookies brings a little extra joy to the meal, it makes it something a little bit more than just a meal. Indeed, if I'm traveling alone and have Chinese delivered to the room, which is what I usually do when I'm traveling alone, I don't even eat the cookie. It wouldn't be the same. It would just make me sad to eat a fortune cookie alone in some sterile hotel room away from the people I love.

Perhaps this is a helpful context in which to begin to appreciate some of the elements of the sacrament of Holy Communion. Though it's common to say we "take" communion as in, "today in church we're going to take communion", really, we're not "taking" anything. Rather, we're simply receiving. It's nothing we've earned. It's nothing we've bought. It's nothing owed to us. And, it's certainly nothing we deserve. Communion, the nourishment it brings to body and soul, is a gift. It is grace incarnate in bread and in the fruit of the vine. The bread and the juice remain bread and juice in this tradition—they are strictly symbolic and not transformed into the actual blood and body of Christ, as is the traditional belief of some of our brothers and sisters in Christ in other expressions of our faith. But, that's not to say that participating in Holy Communion is any less meaningful for us. It's still something special, set apart from other meals, in large part because it is something we do together. Indeed, together is the essence of this experience—we are together in the presence of God, together at the table with Christ, together with one another. While we can have glorious encounters with God while we are alone, the experience of communion is unique to being together in the experience—of sharing the joy of receiving these gifts from God. Indeed, the definition of communion is *the sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially when the exchange is on a mental or spiritual level.*

But, before we go any further in our exploration of Holy Communion, let's take a moment to remember the story of that first communion upon which this holy meal is based. Sam Vukasovich is going to read it to us as it appears in the Gospel according Matthew.

*On the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Where do you want us to make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?"*

*Jesus said, "Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, 'The Teacher says, my time is near; I will keep the Passover at your house with my disciples.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them, and they prepared the Passover meal.*

*When it was evening, he took his place with the twelve . . . While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many of the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.*

And this is why we use bread and juice in communion. This is why we do it together. Jesus doesn't say, "Peter, here, drink this." Jesus says, "Drink of it, ALL of you." We're in this together . . . and I'm so glad we are.

Now, a bit more about the specifics, starting with the bread. The most exciting thing I learned on my sabbatical was that I am still capable of completing a 5k run. The second most exciting thing I learned on sabbatical was something I learned while studying the book of Ruth in the Old Testament. Ruth's mother-in-law, Naomi, was a native of Bethlehem. In the commentary's notes, the author explained that, in ancient Hebrew, Bethlehem means—hold on to your hats because this is a doozy—in ancient Hebrew Bethlehem means *House of Bread*. I mean—can you even believe that? Sadly, when I learned this little gem of information I was home alone with no one to share it with except three cats and a dog and none of them seemed to grasp the significance. Jesus, who says he is the bread of life . . . Jesus who holds out a piece of bread to his friends and says, "Take eat, this is my body, broken for you" . . . Jesus, the bread of life, was born in \_\_\_\_\_ that's right! In Bethlehem—the *House of Bread*—the city known for producing bread to nourish bodies became the city where the bread of life that nourishes our souls was born. I mean really, this is why I just love the Bible. There is always something new to learn, some exciting connection to be made, some evidence that God's Spirit was at work in those who penned it and God's spirit is at work in those of us who continue to learn from it even now—making connections that help us to make meaning in our lives and to find significance in details that might otherwise be overlooked. Jesus, the bread of life, comes from the House of Bread and invites us to this table to receive the symbol of his body, the bread, that nourishes us body and soul I can hardly even stand it.

And then, for the fruit of the vine. Jesus and his disciples drank wine at their Passover celebrations but we use juice and refer to it as "the fruit of the vine" because the word juice just sounds so pedestrian. We use juice instead of wine in large part out of respect for folks for whom alcohol presents stumbling blocks. But be it Welch's grape juice or the finest bottle of sparkling from Mawby, it comes from the fruit of the vine. Jesus' ministry is ripe with references to vineyards. (Get it? Ripe? Vineyards? You're welcome, Bill Klein.) Anyway, vineyards and wine play an important role in the teachings of Jesus. In John's gospel Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." His first public miracle, again according to the Gospel of John, was turning water into wine at a wedding. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus tells the parable of vineyard workers and in Mark's gospel he talks about not putting new wine into old wine skins. Jesus used images of the fruit of the vine literally and metaphorically throughout his ministry. And now, he uses it to symbolize the sacrifice he made to save all of through his blood, a covenant, a promise, to forgive our sin so that we may drink it again, with him, in the kingdom of God. And when we drink of it, we do so and remember him, we remember that we are forgiven, made new, given a second, third, thirteenth chance to start over and try again.

The bread and the juice aren't a serve-yourself snack we take and enjoy part-way through the service, something to tide us over until lunch. The bread and the fruit of the vine are nourishment we receive in the company of our brothers and sisters in Christ, nourishment that feeds us body and soul, nourishment that refreshes and renews. They are a sacrament—an outward and visible sign of an inward grace—a chance to remember, to put us back together again as individuals and as the Body of Christ, nourishment we receive as we are made strong again at the table of the Lord.