

When I teach about the Eucharist in the Sunday school, I first have everyone sit in a circle. Then I tell the kids that there are always 4 actions that take place during the Eucharist. The priest demonstrates them every week.

Do you know what the actions are?

Took, bless, broke, gave.

*“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take, eat; this is my body.””
(Mathew 26)*

4 actions: the Eucharist in a nutshell.

Two of the actions are what a typical host of Jesus’ time would do: taking the bread and giving thanks to God for it--- blessing it— followed by two actions that a servant—or a female—would do: broke the bread into pieces and served it.

We see this every week, right?

Now --in the earliest frescos of the eucharist, made during the first century, we sometimes see a chalice— with handles on either side, but more often there’s no wine. Then there’s a plate of bread, and a plate of fish. The number of people varies—sometimes 7, sometimes 10—or 15.

Now if this were a depiction of Jesus’ last supper- there would be 13 people present—the 12 disciples and Jesus. Why do the numbers vary?

Experts believe these are not depictions of the Last Supper, but are in fact pictures of the Eucharist as celebrated in the early church. So where did the fish come from? It seems that fish and bread may have been central themes of the earliest celebrated Eucharists—before they were bread and wine. That came later- only after the theology of the Lamb of God being sacrificed was developed.

No—it seems that the Eucharist feasts we see in the frescos are not remember Jesus’ last supper—they are remembering another event. Which event?

Now—if we were really paying attention today—we saw the same four actions of eucharist we talked about earlier in another story that was NOT about the last supper.

“Then [Jesus] ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. (Matthew 14)

Well.

Interesting.

No one who read this narrative of Jesus’ ministry from the pen of the author of Matthew could possibly have missed Jesus’ duplication of actions in two separate stories. It was not a coincidence. The writer did this deliberately.

Why?

Let’s go back further--- to Jewish theology.

Jesus was a poor Jew from a place called Galilee. By tradition, the Jews believed that *One Good God* had created a world with enough for everyone. As long as everyone looked upon each other as siblings—there would always be enough to go around. If anyone went to bed hungry, it was because some were taking more than their share.

That’s why the Jewish tradition had a lot of laws about the poor: to make sure the poor would be taken care of when some took more than their share.

Now – forward to the gospel reading today. It is set in a place where many people -- many poor ones, and probably a certain percentage of richer ones--had gathered together to hear this Jew talk about the Kingdom of God—where even the poor were blessed, and the lame walked. This kingdom where all loved, and shared what they had with their neighbors.

Then Jesus talked about compassion— the place where power and love meet. Jesus talked about a power within that didn’t come from politics or money—because he didn’t have either one. He talked about where our love

manifests, and using what power we have to suffer with people--- because that's what compassion means. It doesn't mean empathy- where we feel another person's pain. Compassion goes further- not just to feel, but to actually suffer alongside them. As one of them. When our personal power connects with deep love—we care for everyone.

And just when Jesus thought he might be breaking through—the disciples interrupt—“send these people away to get their own food. We want to eat.”

The disciples had *their* food. Now it was time to get the others to take responsibility for their own well-being and find supper for themselves.

Jesus must have just looked at them in disbelief. Did they not understand at all?

“You feed them.”

I heard about a Eucharist at a youth group where no one had remembered to bring the elements. The leader put a Snickers bar and a water bottle on the table. Then he asked everyone to share what they had. There were Cokes and altoids, gum, a sandwich, along with some smart water and a piece of pie. And he gave thanks—and they all shared the meal. Together.

Jesus took the bread and fish and thanked God for them. Then he broke them up and shared them with everyone. And maybe the people closest saw that act of compassion and shared what little they had, and the act of compassion grew and grew, until finally the rich people – who had thought ahead to bring servants and a plentiful meal to feed them all—became caught up—and their power and their love came together in the compassion that united the crowd, and they shared their bounty. And everyone ate. It was a miracle: self-sacrifice on a scale never witnessed before. And it was never forgotten.

Jesus was a Jew from Galilee who believed that God was good, and that the Kingdom would only exist when we all knew we were siblings. No one would go hungry if everyone shared what they had. If anyone went to bed hungry, it was because some were taking more than their share.

And the kingdom broke into the world that day.

It so changed people that they talked about it, witnessed to it, and incorporated it into the first celebrated Eucharists. Only later, did they realize what Jesus' death signified—the ultimate merging of power and love into a compassion so great it changed the world. Christians became part of a tradition based on 4 actions: they were a people who took what they had, thanked God for it, broke it into pieces and shared it with everyone.

We still have a long way to go to build the kingdom on Earth, but we remember both these stories—which really are one story, which tells us that God's realm is built on compassion: the place where power and love meet.

Amen.