

## **Eucharistic Resources for Liberal Christians: Readings and Service Materials**

### Readings

#### **1. The Kingdom of God is a Feast**

The kingdom of God is a feast. Heaven is a church supper. The metaphor with which Jesus describes the God-intended human community is not a civil metaphor, nor an academic, nor a forensic, but a domestic metaphor. Heaven is a family, or company of friends, eating and drinking around a common table. The kingdom of God is a feast. And when I say feast I don't mean a mere three or four course dinner such as we customarily serve each other because we are watching our weight and our pocketbooks, but I mean a real feast, a true feast such as the wedding feast at Cana when Jesus turned the water into wine—a three or four day feast with singing and dancing and storytelling and tables heaped high with roast lamb, fruits, nuts, olives, breads, sweet cakes, honey and gallons and gallons of good red wine. It was no light snack for the faint of heart, but a full, strong hearty banquet for those who wished to share the joy of their host. That is the kind of occasion which Jesus' hearers thought of when he said that the kingdom of God is a feast.

*From a sermon by Carl Scovel, King's Chapel, Boston, Massachusetts, on Luke 14:7-11.*

#### **2. Harbinger of the Messianic Banquet**

The celebration of Communion is a communal event; it is not something one does by or for oneself. That is why, even in Roman Catholicism, a priest is allowed to celebrate communion on the battlefield with a non-Roman Catholic if there are no other Catholics available; he is not allowed to celebrate mass by and for himself. By whatever name Christians call this central act of breaking bread and sharing the cup—whether as the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, the Sacrifice of the Mass, Christian Thanksgiving or Holy Communion — the celebration is always seen as the act of a community.

Today is World Communion Sunday.. Every year, on the first Sunday of October, Christian churches all over the globe celebrate communion as a witness to their unity amidst the many differences of doctrine and practices that divide them. It is the act of celebrating communion that

unites us with other Christians; it is not the meaning of communion. For, in fact, the meaning of this simple act is one of the things which divide Christian denominations one from another. Nonetheless, the celebration of communion has been part of Christian worship from the time of the very early churches.

Biblical scholar Krister Stendahl has pointed out in an essay on "The New Testament Background for the Doctrine of the Sacraments" that, long before there were any doctrines of Christ's sacrifice and of the bread and wine turning into the body and blood of Christ, communion was celebrated simply as a meal. The early Christians, Stendahl notes from the Book of Acts, "participated in the prayers in the Temple, but at home they broke bread with joy." This regular coming together for a communal meal, to which everyone who could, contributed — a kind of first century potluck supper — was understood to be not only a celebration of the community gathered there. The communal meal also pointed to the future — to the messianic banquet which, in Jewish mythology, would be held when all the peoples of the earth would be gathered together at God's feast, after the Messiah had brought peace and reconciliation to the world. That is why, in every account of celebrating the common meal in the New Testament, there is always some reference to the future banquet, as in this morning's reading when Paul says "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes"—that is until Jesus returns to celebrate the messianic banquet.

Toward the end of our own communion service this morning, there is the phrase, "Our Lord, come!" This is taken from the Didache, a second century communion service — where, by the way, there is no reference to the bread as the body of Christ or to the wine as his blood. Rather, the reference is to the understanding that the communal meal now celebrated is a foretaste of the joy in which we will all participate when God's reign of peace and justice is realized. The bread and cup we share this morning, in other words, is both a celebration of our communal life here in First Parish and an anticipation of the communal life we hope to share with all the peoples of the earth. It is a harbinger of the messianic banquet.

*From a sermon on "Bread, Water and Spirit" by the Rev. Judith Hoehler, at the First Parish in Weston, Massachusetts on World Communion Sunday, October 7, 1984.*

### 3. **The Greatest Thing**

I think that the eucharist as Unitarians generally celebrate it lacks the note of thanksgiving and triumph which was its supreme characteristic historically. It is the love of Jesus — supremely shown in his willingness to lay down his life for those he loved—, and the glorious fellowship of those who with him make love the rule of their lives that the eucharist celebrates. The chief concern of the eucharist is with “the great thing in the world.” Now the absolutely necessary way of showing love is through deeds. We know love only as we experience its work. But that is not the end of the matter. It is human nature to want to celebrate what means most to us. We pay our homage to the memory of the men and of the events which mean most to us. We adorn and beautify the home in which our life may center. Perhaps the eucharist would mean more to us if we recognized it as the Festival of Brotherly Love which it is...

We do not want a mere memorial of Jesus’ last hours. What we do want is to pay our homage to the power of love in the world. Jesus’ last hours are only the illustration and the proof of the love which made him the world’s light. Gratitude and thanksgiving, fellowship and consecration, these are the themes of the eucharist.

*Vincent Brown Silliman, "The Christian Eucharist. As It Might Be Celebrated in Unitarian Congregational Churches," B.D. dissertation, Meadville Theological School, Chicago, Illinois, 1925, p. 7 & p. 8.*

### 4. **Our True Selves**

“And the Lord turned and looked upon Peter.”

That look touched the spring of his recollection. Suddenly he remembered another Peter, a better Peter, of only a few hours ago, who had promised nobly and had really meant as nobly as he had promised. This false Peter, with the words of denial still warm upon his lips, was only a counterfeit, the poor victim of an impulse of terror. He had been frightened into self-forgetfulness, it needed only a look from his Lord, and the self-forgetfulness disappeared. He wept bitterly not only because he had been false to his Lord, but, what was even worse in his Lord’s eyes, because he had been false to himself.

We know how Peter felt, because we so often forget ourselves. We do things that are not only shameful in themselves, but that do not represent the true men or the true women we know ourselves to be. They only represent ourselves disguised, temporarily distorted by passion, temporarily deformed by fright or by the impulse of the moment, It is hard to keep ourselves always in hand, always true and normal and self-remembering. If we could do that, we should sin less than we do, we should make fewer mistakes, we should lead nobler and more gracious lives.

Let us come before this table in order to be reminded of ourselves. Let us bring our disguises and self-denials, our forgetfulness and self-neglect, and submit them to the truth compelling gaze of Him whom our souls meet here, and who is able to look through these and find the surrendered nobilities, the deserted ideals, the broken promises that once were ours and that must be ours again before we can come to our true selves.

*Charles Edwards Park, "Communion Service Addresses, "published by the First Church in Boston Chapter of the Unitarian Laymen's League, 1924.*

## **5. The Beatitude**

The noticeable thing about the Beatitudes is their structure. Each one is divided into two parts. The first part is the statement of an actual fact. That actual fact is good, because it results in a compensation which is promised in the second part. Each sentence must therefore be read completely, or not at all. If we read only the first part of the sentence, we find that it makes little sense and leaves us in doubt. But if we read both parts of the sentence we find that they supplement each other and form a balanced whole — a beatitude.

Our earthly life is only the first part of a beatitude. It makes no sense. It leaves us in doubt. It arouses our hostility and resentment. But there is a second part, a compensating clause, that follows this earthly life and that contains the conclusion, the answer, the sufficient result. That second part is what we call our spiritual life, our religion, our thought of God. In order to make any sense at all out of our earthly life, we must read the sentence through. We have got to see our earthly life in relation to our spiritual life, in relation to God. When we read the two halves together we find they supplement each other. They make a balanced and compensated whole. Life seen that way, in its wholeness, earth in relation to God, becomes beatitude.

This moment is our opportunity to see life in its wholeness—to read the second part of the sentence and let its meaning sink in. To plan without prayer is futile. To work without hope is tragic. To live without God is darkness. But to see the two parts together, the one in relation to the other, the one supplemented by the other, is to find peace and comfort and quietness. When we read the sentence of life straight through, in its completeness, it becomes a beatitude.

Charles Edwards Park, "Communion Service Addresses," published by the First Church in Boston Chapter the Unitarian Laymen's League, 1924.

## 6. **Diviner Possibilities**

*"The glory which thou gavest me, I have given them."*

It only requires one explorer, like Vasco da Gama, or Columbus, or Francis Magellan to expand man's knowledge of the world, and to open his eyes to its size and possibility. It only requires one life like Christ to expand our knowledge of human nature and to open our eyes to its latent powers and graces. The effect of Christ's life is to entirely transform the meaning of life for all time. For the worth of life cannot be judged by the law of averages. It is not what men usually make of life that sets the standard. It is what any man has ever made of life. Christ may be unusual, exceptional. But the simple fact that one solitary Christ lived as he lived changes the whole aspect of life forever. The glory which thou gavest me, I have given them.

We have complained of our human nature—of its narrowness and pettiness, its poverty and limitation. But the human nature which could include one such life as Christ is neither poor nor limited. Thanks to him, every life shines forth in diviner colors, and discovers diviner possibilities.

Let us come before this table resolved to think of Christ, resolved to thank God for the glory of living which he has passed on and made possible for us. Let us bring offerings of penitence for the narrow inadequate past, and of determination to live henceforth more faithfully and fearlessly, with a greater trust in life's beauty and a greater eagerness for its possibilities revealed to us in Christ.

Charles Edwards Park, "Communion Service Addresses," published by the First Church in Boston Chapter of the Unitarian Laymen's League, 1924.

## 7. **The Great Secret**

*"Your life is hid with Christ in God."*

The fifth Chapter of Genesis is called the book of generations of Adam. It contains a list of those legendary persons who were supposed to have descended from Adam. Such a chapter contains little of interest to the ordinary reader, yet as we read along our attention is suddenly arrested by one verse. The particular man of whom this verse speaks is Enoch, the father of Methuselah, and we are told that after living a certain number of years "Enoch walked with God, and he was not." The meaning is obvious, but the way it is expressed is suggestive of a still greater meaning—Enoch walked with God, and he was not. The little knot of egotism and self-consciousness that constituted Enoch's personality was for the moment untied—the personality sank into obscurity—the thing that was Enoch ceased to exist, because it was merged with that larger thing which we call God. Enoch walked with God—and he was not. Enoch laid aside his personality, as a man lays off his vesture, with all its woes and ills and pains and anxieties, and for the moment lost himself in the life of God.

It is our fashion to make a great deal of our personalities. It is right that we should. We accentuate our self-consciousness, and cling to it with a desperate tenacity. To lose self is to lose all, we say. The world has no reality except as we are real, and definite, and observant, and reactive personalities. And when those personalities disappear, the world and everything in it disappears. That is wholly natural and wholly proper. And yet that is a difficult and an incomplete way to live. There is such a thing as the Life of God which forms the background of our existence and the substance of our living. And there is such a thing as losing self, with all the ills and pains of self, in that larger life. Paul spoke a true word when he said that our life is hid with Christ in God.

One of the great resources of religion is the ability it teaches us, of taking a vacation from the exhausting intensity of self-concentration and self-consciousness, and like Enoch, ceasing to be for the moment by merging ourselves with God's life. We cannot help feeling that here was the great secret of Christ's fortitude—the ease with which he habitually related his puzzling little life unto the great inexhaustible wellspring of God's life that flowed about him and through him. That is a resource we need—just that ability every once in a while to take Paul at his words and lay aside these galling personalities of ourselves, and lose ourselves and hide ourselves and regenerate ourselves with Christ in God.

*Charles Edwards Park, "Communion Service Addresses, "published by the First Church in Boston Chapter of the Unitarian Laymen's League, 1924.*

## **8. Rest**

*"Ask and ye shall receive."*

Christ thought of his religion as a resource to which he might turn in every event of life, and which would adapt itself to his need, and supply whatever grace or comfort he required at the time. In his joy and peace he found a blessing in his religion. In his perplexity and distress he found comfort and guidance in his religion. He thought of his religion as something greater than himself. It was the giver. He was the receiver.

That is a hint we might profitably take to heart. Frequently we assume an air of patronage towards our religion. We look upon it as though it were the offspring of our own philosophical sufferance. We enjoy it in times of peace and quiet. But we do not turn to it in times of stress and peril. We seem to think that it is our place to protect and defend our religion. We forget that it ought to be our privilege to be protected and defended by our religion.

That is a costly error, because it deprives us of a great resource, just when we need that resource most. Let us come before this table, therefore, as before a token of God's eternal majesty and power. We have heard the voice of Christ pleading in accents of love, inviting and appealing. Let us hear the voice of Christ, now, commanding us in accents of power and authority. Your world is very full of evil! Come unto me. With me is life and strength and peace. I am equal to your every need. Before Abraham was I am. Come unto me, and ye shall find rest unto your souls.

*Charles Edwards Park, "Communion Service Addresses, "published by the First Church in Boston Chapter of the Unitarian Laymen's League, 1924.*

## **9. Private Meditations before and after Communion**

According to the exhortation of St. Paul, let me examine myself, and so let me eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.

Do I approach the table of my Lord as his humble disciple; seeking his spirit and grace; relying on his word; remembering his great sufferings, and his shameful death, and his surpassing love for me and for all men, for whose salvation he suffered and died? Do I hate and

renounce my sins? Am I in charity with all my neighbors? Am I anxious to follow my Saviour in loving and serving God?—I will wash my hands in innocency, O Lord, and so will I compass thine altar.

#### Prayer before Communion

Behold, gracious Lord, I come to thy table, as one who is sick, to the great Physician. Let me worthily receive these elements of bread and wine, and fill me, O Lord, with that spiritual food, the body and blood of Christ, of which these are the outward signs; that so evil affections may die in me, and all things belonging to the Spirit may live and grow in me, and I be preserved in body and soul, and saved from the second death, and nourished unto eternal life, through him who loved me and gave himself for me, thy dear Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

#### Prayer after Communion

And to thee, O God, my Father, do I give thanks for this holy communion. Grant that it may never turn to my judgment and condemnation, but that it may be, together with my other spiritual privileges, health and recovery under all weakness and infirmities; safety and defense against all the attacks of my spiritual enemies; vigor and strength to all my good purposes and resolutions; comfort and support under all the afflictions and calamities of life; assistance and direction under all difficulties and doubts; courage and constancy under all dangers and persecutions, in times of sickness, and in the hour of death. And be thou, O God, my Father, always with me. Grant me pardon and peace in this life, mercy and favor at the day of judgment, and a never-fading crown of glory in thy heavenly kingdom. These things, for myself and for others, I devoutly ask in the name of Jesus Christ thy blessed Son our Lord. Amen.

*Book of Common Prayer according to the Use in King's Chapel; Boston, 1951; pp. 201–203.*

### 10. **Thick and Thin**

Once I heard Dean Sperry in a lecture at the Harvard Divinity School say this: There had been times, he said, when he scarcely knew what he believed or whether he believed anything at all — times when he was baffled, confused and dismayed—as, no doubt everyone is sometimes. And at those times, he found great good in the Communion. For here was something which generations of people has said and done over the centuries. And somehow, regardless of

doctrine, that gave him a thread of continuity, a kind of steadying. In that service, it was as if he felt himself one with the age-long movement of humanity, together, through thick and thin.

*W L McKinstry, cited in John W~ Laws, "American Unitarian Eucharistic Faith," B. D. dissertation, Meadville Theological School, Chicago, 1938; p. 78.*

## Service Materials

### 11. **The Setting of the Communion Table**

- Minister: Why do we have a table here?  
People: We have a table because we are created and called by God to be a people that gathers in community, to be fed in relationship.
- Minister: Why do we have a cloth on the table?  
People: We have a cloth on the table because God is woven into our lives and we are covered with God's love.
- Minister: Why do we have candles on the table?  
People: We have candles on the table because God is our light and salvation, for to God even the darkness is as light. As people of God, we are called to be light to the world.
- Minister: Why do we have flowers on the table?  
People: We have flowers on the table to be reminded of the mystery and beauty of God's grace.
- Minister: Why do we have bread and wine on the table?  
People: We have bread and wine on the table as symbols of the gifts of God's creation.

*Rev. Laurie M. Bushbaum, Nora Unitarian Church, Hans/ca, Minnesota.*

"I have used this 'setting of the table' for communion services in very small groups, and larger groups. The most exciting service for me, was one in which children and youth participated by laying the cloth, bringing forth and lighting the candles, placing the flowers on the table, etc. There was a powerful sense of community, and a wonderful sense of the power of community in this service, each time. And the Seder format is an affirmation of our Jewish roots."—L.M.B.

### 12. **Bidding Prayers**

Minister: Let all who have breath know their freedom by coming to this table. Duty cannot bring you here, nor fear of conformity keep you far, for this table is everywhere spread.

People: At this table, all that hate dis-members, love remembers, for memory is no burden here.

Minister: Let all come, confusing not humility with self-debasement, nor worship with ceremonial art. Come with your belief and unbelief, for faith is deeper than belief, communion higher than unbelief.

People: We are here at this thy table, Spirit, and thou art here at our table, shaped by our words and acts.

(Here the bread and wine are lifted and there is silence then.)

*The Rev. Mark Belletini, The Celebration of Communion, Starr King Unitarian Church, Hayward, California.*

### 13. **Let Us Remember**

Minister: All peoples, though all time, have considered with wonder and awe the mystery of life and growth...have found symbols to express reverence for the forces of life and ways to celebrate dependence on this nurturing earth. Bread and wine are such symbols. And Communion a way of celebrating both the gifts we are given and the community of relationships in which we use them.

Jesus and his followers shared bread and wine at their last meal together, and for them those elements had the additional significance of being shared during Pesach/ Passover . . . a ritual time in which the liberation of the Hebrew people from bondage is commemorated.

Jesus used the bread and the wine as symbols of the liberation his own sacrifice would mean to those who understood it. He took bread and he poured wine, and he said

“This do in remembrance of me.”

Let us break bread together and share the cup of wine in remembrance of Jesus, as he asked.

Let us remember also all those men and women who toil in all the many kinds of fields and vineyards, who labor and are heavy laden, and be reminded that these elements need to be for us symbols of liberation.

Let us remember the earth itself, from which, like ourselves, the bread and the wine come, and to which all earthly things return.

Let us remember that this is a ritual act of sharing, and that in coming together to worship we join with our sisters and brothers of every race and religion; for we all seek meaning in the midst of mystery, we all find that which is worthy of our profoundest awe. We give it many names, but the sense that we are part of a far larger, an inconceivably vaster whole...this is a feeling we share.

And finally, let us be together in silence as each of us remembers a personal and private sacred moment: Amen.

*The Rev. Richard F. Beal, for use in the Universalist churches of Dexter and Sangerville, Maine.*

#### **14. Table Prayers**

For life, O Life of life, we are glad. Praise unto thee, Goodness, for all goods. Praise unto thee, Truth, for all that's true. And Praise unto thee, Beauty, for wonders and signs.

In love outpoured and courage hard, from days of Abram and Sarai till now: in acts of freedom set against facts of tyranny, we see thy power. In authentic words spoken in the time of lies, from days of the prophets till now: in clarity not hurt by paradox, we see thy power. In balance and fairness and symbol, from days of the Psalmists till now; in proportions which preach against distortion and hideous greed, we see thy power.

And, we see thy power in our brother Jesus, who lived his life by thy will, beautiful and true; good he did, who proclaimed the Age to Come as Present, who schooled us against resentment, violence, madness and submission, who made of categories an end; who from woman's womb to culprit's tomb lived the life that killeth death, making of our despair a hope; making of our disparity a community.

On the eve of his death he did call us to life, and like a weaning mother carried us no more, and set us free. Blessing thee and this festival bread, he said: Here is my body; partake.

Blessing thee and lifting this cup he said: here is to the renewed covenant which now I inaugurate with my suffering. My life seals it: you are all blood-kin. You are my friends. Love one another. The new age is upon you and among you. By living its life now, you remember me to the Eternal and make me present again.

Therefore, Spirit of Life, come now, in us move. Let this common bread sign for us the Body of which all humanity is part, our "bread for the morrow" which we taste today. Let this common cup sign the sacrifice required of us before the "Rule of God" can begin. Let bread and cup be for us that inescapable communion which is our whole and only salvation. By living thankfully and discerning the Body's unity, and by celebrating our universal kinship even when it hurts to do so, we proclaim Easter more beautifully than lilies, more truly than doctrine, and better than any signing of it. Therefore, holy are these gifts,

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY!

And these are now gifts for the givers, gifts of spirit to people of spirit; bearers of our own becoming, gifts of spirit to people of spirit; beautiful, true and good, gifts of spirit to people of spirit. Amen.

*The Rev. Mark Belletini, The Celebration of Communion, Starr King Unitarian Church, Hayward, California.*

## **15. Eucharistic Prayer for Children**

We thank you God,  
Father and Mother of us all.  
From the beginning you made the world and all its creatures;  
You made people to live for you and for each other.  
We praise you, God.

You created Adam and Eve and gave them a garden;  
You showed Noah a rainbow;  
You gave strength to Moses to free his people  
and taught Miriam to sing;  
You gave courage to Esther  
and loyalty to Ruth;  
You helped David defeat the giant  
and gave him a harp to sing with.  
We praise you, God.

And yet even they turned away from you  
and forgot about you, as we do too.  
But you did not forget.  
You sent your only child Jesus to the world  
to show how much you love us  
and to bring us back to you again  
We praise you, God.

As one of us he came,  
at first a tender infant,  
then a child, a youth and an adult,  
He rejoiced with those who rejoiced  
and wept with those who wept.  
To the despairing he spoke a word of hope.  
To the sick he gave healing.  
To the rejected he was a friend.

And yet he was betrayed and nailed to a cross.  
But he was lifted from the grave  
and restored to life,  
that he might be with us  
and we with him  
Alive for evermore!  
Therefore, with all the saints, and with angels in the heavens,  
our hearts beat with happiness and we sing  
Holy, holy, holy Lord,  
God of power and might.  
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.  
Hosanna in the highest.  
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord  
Hosanna in the highest.

On the night before Jesus died, he had supper with his disciples:  
he took bread;

thanked you, as we have thanked you;  
broke the bread;  
and gave the bread to his friends, saying,  
"Take this, all of you, and eat it.  
This is my body, given for you.  
Each time you do this, remember me."  
After supper he took the wine;  
thanked you for it,  
and passed a cup of wine to his friends, saying,  
"This cup is the new promise God has made with you  
in my blood.  
Each time you do this and drink from this cup,  
remember me."  
Remembering his death and celebrating his resurrection,  
we await with hope his coming again  
to bring peace and justice to the earth.  
Come, Lord Jesus.

We pray you, God of Love,  
Send your Holy Spirit upon us and what we do here  
that we, and these gifts,  
touched by your Spirit, may  
be signs of life and love  
to each other, and to all the world.  
Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
all glory is yours, God most holy,  
now and for ever.  
Amen.

*Eucharistic Prayer VII from A Sunday Liturgy for optional use in The United Church of Canada; Working Unit on Worship and Liturgy, Division of Mission in Canada, United Church of Canada, 1984; reprinted by permission.*