

Broken Open: A Holy Week Retreat Experience

Today is Tuesday of Holy Week. My name is Megan Oakes; I am a Senior Theology Major. Our theme today is Called to Community.

It's strange to talk about community in the midst of Covid. Our communities, to various extents, have been separated, whether permanently through the enormous amount of death we have experienced during this past year, or more temporarily because of physical separation. For me, this sense of separation has made experiences of community even more poignant. Experiences that may once have felt mundane (and which I previously took for granted) have provided glimpses into the sacred, filled with all the power and beauty of God in much frailer, more fragile human intimacies. Our experiences of sharing food with those who need it, creating and participating in mutual aid networks, and trying to struggle for justice together have felt incredibly sacramental.

When church shut down originally last March, I could not have believed that it would be over a year and counting before I could receive the eucharist. I still can't really believe it, if I'm being honest. I miss all of the liturgical practices that at the time felt so ordinary, but now are glaringly absent from my spiritual life. But somehow, for me, that hole left in the place of the sacraments in my relationship with God has allowed me to see the body of Christ in different ways, many of them outside of the confines of church. The framework that I have grown up in of sacred liturgy and ritual has, in the pause of the typical liturgical celebrations, been a way for me to see the community of the church in non "church-y" practices. My life of immersion and socialization into the practices of the church has given me a lens to engage with the whole of my life sacramentally. Through the loss of typical church rituals this year, I've been able to experience my conceptions of what church and community are broken open. Seeing God's work through less hierarchical, more radically inclusive communities that I have encountered has helped make me aware of where the church fails to engage with the body of Christ in the world, even as we talk about the body of Christ on the altar. Our experiences physically nurturing each other become spiritually nourishing, as our care for each other's bodies shows our care for each other as beloved children of God. Through these nourishing

community experiences, the loss of our formal rituals of community feels less crushing, and more like an opportunity to encounter God and each other in a different way.

One of the most sacramental experiences that I have ever experienced took place this June, when I was sitting on the ground at a Black Lives Matter protest. There were hundreds of us sitting at Westlake, listening to speakers. Someone in the crowd stood up and started walking around with a bottle of hand sanitizer, and those of us sitting extended our hands in a posture that mirrored the way we hold our hands to receive the Eucharist. I felt the presence of Christ more authentically in this experience of communal care and sharing in the midst of struggle for justice than in so many other experiences of the “actual” Eucharist. This experience of being broken open in community captures, for me, what our practices inside of the walls of the church are intended to foster – nourishment and care that enables us to work together for justice.

I know that when it is safe to fully share food and celebrate the Eucharist in community together, this experience of having my understanding of sacrament broken open will not leave me. Without being linked to a struggle towards liberation and transformation, the Eucharist does not authentically communicate the body of Christ that we discuss during Holy Week. If we are not engaging with Christ crucified in our own contexts, how can we talk about the Eucharist as Christ’s body? I think that through understanding the relationship between our communal liturgical practices and the other communities that we find ourselves placed in, we can see how our encounters with Christ in members of our communities through liberative work can illuminate our encounters with Christ in our church communities. We need to see Christ’s emergent body outside of the church, and work to transform our church into one that uplifts an inclusive struggle for justice both in practices and in mission. The loss of typical church community over the past year has been so painful and experiencing another Holy Week without the normal celebrations hurts. And even in this, I can feel myself becoming more broken open to experience Christ in communities outside of the physical confines of church buildings, and to truly work towards creating a society where we engage with Christ in all people, especially in the most marginalized.

- How can community be liberating?
- How does God nourish you for the journey of faith and discipleship?
- How might God want us to break open our communities to work towards justice?