

Passed on to us (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

The church that came before us taught us how to love worship and to care deeply for its vitality and life.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#)

April 15, 2019

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

“For I received from the Lord what I handed on to you.”

These words frame the ritual of communion. They are words spoken in front of congregations for centuries, as the presider holds the bread and the cup aloft. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians reminds us of the power of tradition. We receive from Paul what he handed on to Corinth, that which they handed on to others, as the words wash over us week after week.

All churches have traditions, but every once in a while a passage springs up that reminds us how deep the root goes. From time to time I like to read the Didache, the church’s oldest extant examination of the liturgy. We read in chapter 9 how the second-century church imagined this ritual: “Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Your kingdom.” The text offers instruction on what kind of water one should be baptized in (flowing water) and our disposition before we gather for worship (“let no one that is at variance with his fellow come together with you,” chapter 14).

Often this kind of church work can feel like minutia, clouding the way of the more important things of faith. Sometimes we are distracted by the details of our

worshipful life. But there is also something delightful about caring for the proper words of a post-Eucharistic prayer and for what to do when a “wayfarer” comes into community life.

In many ways, the church that came before us taught us how to love worship and to care deeply for its vitality and life. “For I received from the Lord what I handed on to you.” *This is what I’ve learned*, Paul seems to tell them, *and now I give it to you*. A gift is passed, across the landscape, unfettered by checkpoints or military garrisons, a free gift of love.

Paul pulls no punches when he hears rumors of the misuses of the Lord’s Supper. This too has been handed on to us—the table is a place that does not distinguish between the rich and the poor, the lower and upper classes. “Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?” Paul scowls. “Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?” (11:22).

And then Paul explains why. Jesus once gathered his friends and he took bread, telling them this was his body, and told them to eat. He took a cup, gave thanks, and told them to drink.

To proclaim the Lord’s death is to proclaim a world that crucified Jesus—and to make a place in it with love’s resistance to social divisions, to militarism, to coercion. On Maundy Thursday we recall these words again, passed on to us, passed on in our speaking again.