

How do you find Jesus in the neighborhood?



It's becoming more common these days for people to talk about finding out what God is doing in your neighbourhood and joining God in that work.

A few years ago, Alan Roxburgh wrote a book called *Missional*, which had the subtitle, *Joining God in the neighbourhood*.

He said, ***“What is God up to in our neighbourhoods and communities? How do we join with what God is doing in these places? Church questions are a subset of these far more important questions.”***

It's a beautiful concept, that the sovereign God is working beyond the church, attending to his grand redemptive purposes, touching lives in some prevenient way — the love of God wooing our neighbours; the will of God drawing them; the desire of God pursuing them; the gift of God healing them; the presence of God empowering them; the word of God convicting them.

We've all heard stories of Muslims in closed Islamic countries having dreams in which Christ appears. We might have had our own experience of God “turning up” in our lives before we encountered any Christian ministry.

But the idea of finding out what God is doing in your neighbourhood and joining in seems abstract. How do we know what Christ doing in the world?

Stanley Hauerwas, when confronted with this idea, had an important response. He said, ***“I have no doubt that Jesus is present by his Spirit at work in the world outside the church, yet the church, in gathering around the Eucharist, is the one place where we know he is present. And so it is here where we learn to recognize Jesus and his work and from whence we can move in the world and see him clearly there as well.”***

At least this is the way David Fitch remembers it in his book *The End of Evangelicalism?*

What Hauerwas is saying is that Christ is at work in your neighbourhood, yes, but it's our regular participation in the Eucharist that teaches us what the work of Christ looks like so we can recognise him when we go looking to find him at work in the world.

In other words, Jesus isn't doing anything we don't find him doing in the communion feast. So, what work is he doing in the Eucharist?

I want to suggest five things:

The Eucharist is a meal of liberation.



In three of the gospels the Lord's Supper is linked to the Passover feast, which is nothing if not a celebration of liberation from oppression and slavery.

The earliest Christians ate the meal to remember the existential liberation they had experienced in Christ — freedom from fear and sin and death and the devil — but they knew that such liberation was also material and political.

When Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd he isn't primarily revealing his tenderness and care for lost sheep. That idea is found in a parable in the Gospels of Matthew (Mt 18:12–14) and Luke (Lk 15:3–7).

But in John's Gospel, Jesus the Good Shepherd throws open the gates of the filthy sheep pen and leads the sheep to green pastures. The early Christians knew that this referred to freedom from oppressive religion.

But they also knew he had inaugurated his public ministry by quoting Isaiah 61:1, ***“He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”***

If this is what we see Christ doing in the Eucharist, then the place where we find him in the world would be wherever people work to liberate others from oppression.

The work of Christ would include freeing children from cages, refugees from detention, prisoners from death row. It would include liberating women and children from fear and violence. Surely, Christ would be present at AA, NA, and other programs that address addiction.

The Eucharist is an egalitarian meal.

Paul's words to the Corinthians on how to conduct the feast reveals his horror that there were powerful people who were eating their fill while the poor or the less desirable members were left with the dregs. At a table where Jesus is the host, everyone is accepted and welcomed, and everyone has enough.

The Eucharist recalls Jesus' table fellowship with the marginalized and outcast. He was the "one who eats with sinners", after all.

And in case that's not explicit enough, recall his own words on what hospitality should look like from Luke 14:12-14, "***When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.***"

Where is Christ in the neighbourhood? At those initiatives that foster access and equity, that express hospitality and generosity. Look for him there.

The Eucharist is a shared meal



In the early church, the Eucharist was celebrated as part of a real meal. The believers gathered to eat in shared courtyards and porticos, in full view of their neighbours.

All were welcome to join. Food was shared freely. And at the centre of the gathering there was table bread and wine that was used to declare the atoning sacrifice of Christ who frees us from oppression and slavery and invites us all to feast together as a new, redeemed society.

The Eucharist is a call to share our food, so that no one is hungry. It is a call to share our talents and resources on behalf of those in need.

No wonder we could be certain that we'd find Christ at work in soup kitchens and feeding centers, and at agencies and societies that share with those in need.

The Eucharist is an eschatological meal

We are commanded to eat this meal with one eye on eternity. Paul writes, "**For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes**" (1Cor 11:26).

Until he comes.

The Eucharist is a sample and foretaste of God's reign of love. In celebrating it we are anticipating the day when all sin will be judged and everything set to rights under the kingship of Christ.

While we believe the reign of Christ is a present fact and we participate in it as we give our allegiance to God and seek to do his will on earth, we still wait in hope for its coming, its full realization.

In the meantime, our hope in the age to come compels us to pray for it, and work for it, and continue with our compassionate actions for greater justice.

Wherever you encounter those hardy souls who hold on to hope, who keep going against all the odds, who trust a new day will dawn, you can be sure Christ isn't far away.

The Eucharist is a sign of transformation



The Eucharist is a meal for a redeemed society. In eating it we confess our sin, accept Christ's grace, and find fresh resolve to live out that redemption.

The Eucharist is an invitation to us to go forth from the meal to break our own bodies and shed our own blood in the service of others, and the communal nature of the meal reminds us that we are not alone in this ongoing struggle for a just society and world. More than that, we know Christ is with us, even to the end of the age.

The church, as Lesslie Newbigin reminded us, is the sign, instrument and foretaste of the reign of God.

So, where do we find Christ in the neighborhood?

Wherever his children are. Wherever *you* are!

Serving the poor, preaching liberation, setting prisoners free, hosting meals, practising hospitality, lifting up the name of Jesus.

I think the idea is that when the same group of people meet regularly to break bread and drink wine and tell each other the story of Christ's birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection, over time, they have a whole body experience of that story.

They hear it, they taste it, they see it embodied in each other, they are inspired by it, they make its contours the rhythms of their own lives, collectively and individually.

How do we know Christ is present? He becomes present in our imaginations and our hearts and our sense of togetherness. We learn him and we eat him. We picture him and we swallow him. It is a mystery, I know.

You might think it illogical and sentimental, but we believe he is present in Spirit, and that belief has inspired many of us to lay

down our lives as he did his, to serve the poor and release the captives and to declare him our king and our friend.

