

Love Feast: For a Time Like This

Though well-known in Wesley's time and in early American Methodism, the Love Feast, a Christian fellowship meal, is infrequently observed among United Methodists today. But might it be a place of refreshment and renewal amidst our new practices of physically distant worship?

It has become clear in recent weeks that there is a great variety of thought and disagreement when it comes to celebrating Holy Communion by virtual means. In these times, the Love Feast becomes a uniquely Wesleyan expression of community: though not sacramental, it is a well-established part of our theological tradition and encourages fellowshiping, testimony, breaking bread together (even virtually!) and lay participation, all important parts of Methodist ritual practice.

But what exactly *is* a Love Feast? And how do we celebrate it?

The Love Feast we know today is patterned on the Agape Meal of the early church. Methodist historian Emory Stevens Bucke writes, "The oldest known document on the orders of the church is the *Didache*, and it is here that the primitive Christians spelled out the first regulations for the agape." These regulations noted that the Agape Meal, or Love Feast, was distinct from eucharist or communion, and that it was conducted by laymen. Most scholars, Bucke explains, credit Eastern Orthodox and Coptic Christians for maintaining the practice of the Love Feast over the centuries, until it became popular among German Pietists in the 1600s.

"The modern history of the Love Feast began when Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians in Germany introduced a service of sharing food, prayer, religious conversation, and hymns in 1727," according to the *Book of Worship*. A decade later, John Wesley was introduced to the Love Feast in Savannah, Georgia, and it quickly grew in popularity among Methodist societies.

One account of a Love Feast from 1780 reads, "all that had obtained peace with God, and all who were seeking it, were invited, and the barn was nearly full." At this Love Feast, Thomas Ware recalls that participants shared bread and water, "not as a sacrament, but in token of our Christian love."

The Love Feast is easily adapted to a variety of settings, but at its most basic it includes a reading from scripture, prayer, exhortation or testimony, and the sharing of food. Gather a group by videoconferencing, such as Zoom, and invite them to bring whatever food and drink they have to be blessed and shared by themselves or with their household. In the Moravian tradition, a cup of coffee and a roll is perfectly appropriate for a Love Feast!



When the group is gathered, follow our order of service below. Adapt it as needed, perhaps offering more time for prayer or inviting multiple people to testify to the scripture reading. Unlike Holy Communion, a Love Feast may be entirely lay-led, so it could be particularly appropriate for a day the pastor will not be able to be present.

For United Methodist Women, as an organization of laywomen in the Wesleyan tradition, the love feast represents our commitment to Christ and our promise to strive for personal and social holiness in all that we do. It is our prayer that this resource will help us to find Christ at the table – much like the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

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Love Feast Liturgy

Originally prepared for Leadership Development Days 2020

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Preparation

Each participant may bring what they have to be blessed and shared, with those who are physically with them and/or in spirit with those gathered virtually. Bread, sweet rolls, coffee and soup are all foods that have been used for love feasts in various traditions. At our most recent Leadership Development Days event, we shared dried fruit, chocolate, grapes and gluten-free crackers with one another.

Welcome

Suggestion: Begin with a brief time of familiarizing with the technology (e.g., How do we mute? Can we see one another?) followed by prayer and/or a check-in question.

Introduction to the Love Feast

A Love Feast is a Christian fellowship meal that recalls the meals shared among Jesus and his followers, like the one in Emmaus. John Wesley discovered this custom among Moravians here in the United States, and it became an important part of Methodist ritual.

As an organization of laywomen in the Wesleyan tradition, for United Methodist Women the Love Feast represents our commitment to Christ and our commitment to strive for personal and social holiness in all that we do. Like the disciples in the scripture today, may we see Jesus at this table.

Scripture: Luke 24:13-35

The Walk to Emmaus

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad.

Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?"

He asked them, "What things?"

They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him."

Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Testimony

One or more members of the group may testify to the scriptures.

Blessing and sharing the feast

Let's take a moment in prayer to bless this meal.

*God of fresh starts,
of new beginnings,
of renewal and restoration,
We awake to your grace,
embraced by love unconditional.
With each morning
You birth new possibilities
in us; around us.
We are surrounded by sacred potential.
There are so many ways to love.
May we rise to the day's call
To listen for the aches
To give voice to the beauty
To be a companion to justice.
For the morning, enfleshed*

Credit: Rev. M. Barclay, <https://enfleshed.com/pages/liturgy-library>

Song (play softly as people share the meal)

Suggestions: Blest Be the Tie That Binds, The Lord Is My Light, Be Thou My Vision

Blessing

Just as God's Word was sent into the world
to heal and redeem,
so God sends you into the world this day
to be light and love, healing and hope.
Go now to be light for the world!
And may the grace and peace of God the Creator,
the Redeemer, and the Sustainer
come upon you this day
and remain with you always. Amen.

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Sources:

- *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, 2005, pp. 581-582
- "Thomas Ware Hears Moving Testimony During Love Feast at a Quarterly Meeting in New Jersey," *The Methodist Experience in America*, Richey et. al., p. 68
- "American Methodism and the Love Feast," Emory Stevens Bucke, p. 8. 1963, accessed through GCAH at archives.gcah.org/bitstream/handle/10516/1331/MH-1963-07-Bucke.pdf?sequence=1.