

Death and the Eucharist  
A Reflection offered at the NEXT Church National Conference  
February 2018

My father died on June 21, 2011, right smack dab in the middle of the day. I had just finished my second year of seminary and by that time he had been suffering from liver cancer for over two years. Being with him on the last days of his life were like watching the end of a candle burn, flickering, sputtering even, as the last sparks of light eventually gave way to a smoldering wick of a man.

My dad knew from the time he was 8 years old that he wanted to be a doctor. It was in that year that he spent several months in the hospital recovering from a Christmas morning accident, when he'd been standing too close to a space heater and his bathrobe caught fire, burning about a quarter of his body. The care he received from the doctors and nurses in the months following convinced him his life was meant for healing. My dad was a good doctor and a good, albeit complicated, man. He gave his life to his patients, including many of the patients other doctors refused to care for. He contracted Hepatitis B in the 80s when he nicked himself while operating on an infected patient. The disease lay largely dormant in his liver for 20 years, until it manifest as cancer in 2009, and eventually killed him. There is a sense of irony I can't quite shake that my dad's clear call to heal, and willingness to live into that call, were the very thing that killed him.

The hospital where my dad worked flew the flags at half mast on the day he died, and as I stood at his funeral, looking at the faces of the hundreds of people whose lives had been changed by him, I felt proud to be his child, and challenged to carry on his legacy to bring healing into this world.

A couple of weeks before he died, he lost most of his appetite. We stocked the freezer with popsicles, but what my dad really loved was juice. One afternoon I can remember him slowly moving into the living room, gently sitting down, and asking for toast and grape juice. In seminary I had been learning about different theories of the Eucharist - words like transubstantiation, consubstantiation, the blood of christ, the bread of life. I learned about tables being fenced, and the ways in which the church had tried to draw boundaries around the language and access to the meal.

But on that day, when my dad sat down and asked for bread and juice, I learned more about the eucharist than I would ever learn in school. Bread and juice - elements as ordinary as those I pack in my child's lunchbox every day. We may use fancy words or abstract ideas, wax poetic about what happens when this bread and wine are broken and served. But at the end of the day, the Eucharist is about sharing a meal with our family, however it may be defined. If I knew I was going to die tomorrow, I can think of nothing I'd rather do than share a meal with the people who know me best. To laugh one last time, break bread together, and to lean into the vulnerable space of asking to be remembered.