

SERMON: September 2, 2018 The Basics of our Faith: Communion
TEXT: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
SUBJECT: Becoming the Body of Christ
THEME: If we belong to Christ, we belong to each other.
PURPOSE: For us to see each other as fellow servants of Christ.
PICTURE: Communion elements

Today is our last message in the series of “The Basics of our Faith”, and we are going to look at our ritual of communion.

As we said last week, here in the United Methodist Church we have two sacraments - baptism and communion. These are the two rituals that we recognize as having been instituted by Jesus and He commanded us to continue. Of all of the functions that I have at this church, these are the two most important - bringing new people in, and reminding us all of our connection with and through God.

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Our scripture today was written by Paul to his friends at Corinth, who were having some arguments about their faith and the best way to express it. I know this seems foreign to you; we NEVER argue today about ANYTHING that has to do with worship styles or preferences, or how loud the music should be or what we should wear to church!

But bear with me, as strange as it may seem to you that people may like to worship differently from the way that you do, and we’ll get through this together.

It’s interesting that even back then, there was discord about worship practices! So Paul wrote to them simply, trying to get them to focus on what was uniting them, not on what was dividing them:

*23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.”
25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”*

And that’s it! That is the essence of our communion ritual! Adding more to it does not give us any more stature in heaven; doesn’t make us more holy or better than any other denomination. ***All of the other parts that we have added to it are simply amplifications of the essence that Jesus gave His life for us, and asks us remember Him.***

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Interesting work - “Remember”. When you DISmember something, what are you doing?

You are taking it apart. You are ripping it up. You take the life out of something.

RE-member

But to REmember - that means to put back together. When you remember something, you start to relive it again! It becomes real, and whole and meaningful again.

So when Jesus asks us to eat of the bread and drink from the cup and remember, He is asking us to join together with Him, and with each other.

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In Eastern culture, you do not eat with just anybody. There is an old custom that if you share water with someone, you are indicating that you consider that person family for a period of one year. But if you EAT with them, that means that they are family for life.

Do you start to understand the significance now of why Jesus said, "I have longed to eat this Passover meal with you"? It wasn't just a casual meal; it was a cementing of that relationship that they had built over the past three years, and an indication that they were now family.

Last week during the Baptism ritual we talked about how anybody who calls Jesus "Lord" is my brother or sister; now during our ritual today we see that we are all coming to the same table - the Lord's table - and that anyone who kneels with me at that table is my family for life!

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So let's start looking at the ritual and re-member who we are as the family of Christ:

Christ our Lord invites to His table all who love Him, who repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another. Therefore, let us confess our sin before God and one another.

We have what we call "open communion" in the United Methodist Church, meaning that you do not have to be a member here in order to receive communion. In some churches you are not allowed to receive communion unless you are a member of that denomination, or sometimes only if you are a member of that particular church!

That's not the way we do it here. Their reasoning is that they believe the Eucharist (the Greek name for communion, literally "Good grace") - is reserved only for those who adequately prepared themselves for receiving Christ. In their understanding, if you are not a part of their church, then you obviously don't understand the faith.

To me, that sounds a bit arrogant, but then I'm starting to cast stones! Instead, I will say that I believe that the grace of Jesus Christ is open to everyone, and as we just said, "Christ...invites to His table all who love Him, who repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another."

The next part is the prayer that we all say, and it's a tough prayer - take a minute to look through it, and circle any parts that you like and underline any parts that you don't like:

***Merciful God,
we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have failed to be an obedient church.
We have not done your will,***

***we have broken your law,
we have rebelled against your love,
we have not loved our neighbors,
and we have not heard the cry of the needy.***

Forgive us, we pray.

***Free us for joyful obedience,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

(GIVE TIME)

What do you think?

Okay, so then I say:

This is the good news:

***Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God's love toward us.
In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!***

In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven! Glory to God. Amen.

Now, at this point, we have the passing of the peace. We've already done that here this morning, so in the future on Communion Sundays (usually the first Sunday of each month) we will do it here in the service.

This is important in my mind because of Matthew 5:23-24:

23 "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.

This is a reminder that we can't lie to God. Communion is not just an individual act between me and God; it is a COMMUNITY act of living in right relationships with each other!

If we take this verse seriously, we realize that coming to the altar while bearing grudges or resenting somebody else is cheap grace - we want God to forgive us, but we aren't willing to forgive somebody else!

For that reason, I understand the Catholic's insistence upon confession before receiving communion, because we can't truly receive grace if we don't know how to give it. So even this morning if there is somebody that you need to forgive, do it before you take communion! And if that person is here this morning, take this time to do what we say next:

Let us offer one another signs of reconciliation and love.

I had a lady in one church who was so bothered by this that she did not take communion that morning - she realized that she had been resenting her sister for something that had happened, and that it would have been hypocritical of her to try to pretend that everything was okay.

Don't you hate when God does that to you? Why can't He just forgive me, and make other people pay for what they've done?!?

But I pray that the Holy Spirit will continue to mess with me when I'm not right with Him - and with you, too - so that we can truly be His redemptive body in this world.

Okay - after we've asked for and given reconciliation to each other, we come to the next part -

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to You, Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. You formed us in Your image and breathed into us the breath of life. When we turned away, and our love failed, Your love remained steadfast. You delivered us from captivity, made covenant to be our sovereign God, and spoke to us through the prophets.

And so, with Your people on earth and all the company of heaven we praise Your name and join their unending hymn:

***Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of Your glory.***

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

Throughout this section are various places where the ritual indicates that the pastor may add contextual prayers - if there is something going on in the world or in our particular community that needs to be addressed.

And then I will say,

Holy are you, and blessed is Your Son Jesus Christ.

Your Spirit anointed Him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to announce that the time had come when You would save Your people.

He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners.

By the baptism of His suffering, death, and resurrection You gave birth to Your Church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit. When the Lord Jesus ascended, He promised to be with us always, in the power of Your Word and Holy Spirit.

And then I will say,

On the night in which He gave Himself up for us, He took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to His disciples, and said: "Take, eat; this is My body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Why bread? Why not steak, or potatoes, or ice cream?

Bread back then wasn't like it is today. Today we grind and process all of the nutrients out of it, and then add them back in and call it "WONDERFUL"!

But back then, bread was a full meal in itself. It was rough and course and hearty. You could survive on just bread. It was at every meal, and sometimes it was the ENTIRE meal!

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Wine, on the other hand wasn't always had at every meal - but it was ALWAYS served at special occasions! Weddings, celebrations, things like that -

So I've come to the conclusion that one of the reasons that Jesus chose the bread and wine was to say, "Remember Me. In the everyday times, remember that I'm with you. During the celebration times, remember Me. In good times and in bad; through day-by-day life and through the high points and the low, invite Me to be with you."

When the supper was over, He took the cup, gave thanks to You, gave it to His disciples, and said:

"Drink from this, all of You; this is My blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me."

And so, in remembrance of these Your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us, as we proclaim the mystery of faith.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.

***Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,
and on these gifts of bread and wine.
Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,
that we may be for the world the body of Christ,
redeemed by his blood.***

***By your Spirit make us one with Christ,
one with each other,
and one in ministry to all the world,
until Christ comes in final victory
and we feast at his heavenly banquet.***

***Through your Son Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit in your holy Church,
all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father,
now and forever. Amen.***

And then we would say the Lord's Prayer, and after that I take the elements and bless them:

Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ.

The cup over which we give thanks is a sharing in the blood of Christ.

The body of Christ, given for you. Amen.

The blood of Christ, given for you. Amen.

As we said at the beginning, there's all kinds of arguments that could be had here - isn't that sad, that we could argue over sharing in the communion of Christ?

What kind of bread do we use? Should we use real wine? Should children receive? Do we use individual cups, or a common cup? Do we dip, or all drink out of the same cup?

In the United Methodist Church, we are not given any specific prescribed way of doing it, other than an ordained elder has to preside. Once I have blessed the elements, I can give you the authority to share it.

One other thing, about hygiene and safety - during some times of the year (like flu and cold season), people raise concerns about who is handling communion. Believe it or not, we have done research on this!

We Methodists use the unfermented grape for communion, because of our concern for those who have difficulties with alcohol. We believe that we can worship God just as well with non-alcoholic grape and still stand with our brothers and sisters for whom it would be a problem.

When someone tries to insist that we use actual wine, because that's what Jesus used, I ask them what kind of bread they use. If you're going to be a hard-liner in one area, you'd better be consistent!

Usually they tell me they prefer the Hawaiian style bread, to which I would reply, "You don't use unleavened matzoh? Hypocrite!" (Well, usually I'm kinder than that, but isn't it interesting how we make allowances on one side but not the other! Besides, matzoh tastes horrible!)

I prefer intinction, because that is closer to the way that Jesus would have done it. Remember, He told said, "the one who dips bread into the bowl with Me."

Before we serve communion, the stewards come up and clean their hands with me. And if they pull off a piece of bread and offer it to you, only one clean hand is touching the bread instead of the entire congregation all touching it and contaminating it.

Besides, when the bread is cut, how many hands are touching it then? And as for dipping into the same cup (we don't all drink out of it!), science has shown us that people getting sick who receive communion that way are no different percentage-wise from people who don't receive communion at all. There is no greater risk of contamination, as long as common sense and hygiene is used.

We will be participating in communion after our normal fashion today - cut bread and individual cups - and we will alter this sometimes in the future. But we will always do it with safety in mind.

The important thing is - do we REMEMBER? Do we gather together to truly commune with each other, not just to get our own soul filled? That's what the Lord's Supper is about. We remember, we support each other, we forgive, we open up our hearts to people who are different from us but who still want to serve the same Lord.

We become the Body, by sharing together.

(COMMUNION)