

Sermon for July 7, 2019 Communion Sunday
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Exodus 12: 21-27; 1 Cor. 11: 23-29; Matt. 26:26-29
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Remember

Jesus Christ, giver of every good gift, including the gift of your own self, be in these words and in our hearts. Amen.

The Presbyterian Church is sometimes puzzling. When I was ordained, my new title was Minister of Word and Sacrament. Then, a few years ago, the General Assembly decided to follow Calvin's theology and change the title to Teaching Elder, emphasizing the importance of educating through preaching. In 2017, the General Assembly changed its mind and decided it was more appropriate to highlight both calls of the pastor, switching back to Minister of Word and Sacrament. Who knows how long that will last? But for this morning, teaching and sacrament are related as we reflect on the Lord's Supper and what it means to us.

First, a little story. It was communion Sunday. The young pastor was getting ready to distribute communion as the people came forward. Every communion Sunday, a little girl, about four, would come up with her parents and reach for the bread, but her mother or father would push her hands away and whisper, "You're too young. You don't understand." The child's whole demeanor would sadden. After the fourth or fifth time this happened, the pastor felt miserable for the girl, so he asked the parents if it would be okay with them if she partook.

"No," they both said. "She's too young. We will decide when she is old enough to understand."

Sighing, the pastor dreaded the next communion Sunday when, once again, he would see the reproach on this child's face.

The next communion Sunday came around, and the parents approached with their little girl, and the same routine happened. Only this time, as the girl was led away by her parents, she turned around, stared hard at the pastor, and loudly accused him, "You're not sharing!" At that point, the pastor gave her the bread.

Of course, the parents were irate and confronted him afterwards. "You disregarded our desires. You gave our daughter the bread, and she doesn't understand at all what happened."

The pastor looked at the smiling girl, the angry parents, and simply asked, "And you do? Then please explain it to me." The child, who in seeing the outward sign of bread and cup, knew that there was something more, something special, that she was being deprived of. After that Sunday, she received communion without question.

Now, a little history. I could spend all morning quoting several of our historic confessions in regard to the Lord's Supper—what it means, how it is to be administered, who may properly administer it, who may receive it, how one should receive it, and on and on—but I have no wish to put you to sleep. Instead, let me share just a few snippets:

From the 1561 Helvetic Confession:

“The Supper of the Lord (which is called the Lord's Table, and the Eucharist, that is, a Thanksgiving), is, therefore, usually called a supper because it was initiated by Christ at his last supper, and still represents it, and because in it the faithful are *spiritually* fed and given drink. . . . The body and blood of the Lord, while remaining in their own essence and property, are *spiritually* communicated to us, certainly not in a corporeal but in a *spiritual* way, by the Holy Spirit, who applies and bestows upon these things which have been prepared for us by the sacrifice of the Lord's body and blood for us, namely the remission of sins, deliverance, and eternal life; so that **Christ lives in us and we live in him**, and he causes us to receive him by true faith to this end that he may become for us such *spiritual* food and drink, that is, our life.”

From the 1649 Shorter Westminster Confession:

“What is the Lord's Supper? The Lord's Supper is a sacrament, wherein by giving and receiving bread and wine, according to Christ's appointment, his death is showed forth; and the worthy receivers are, not after a corporal and carnal manner, but by faith, made partakers of his body and blood, with all his benefits, to their *spiritual* nourishment and growth in grace.”

From the Larger Westminster Confession:

“The Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper agree in that the author of both is God; the *spiritual* part of both is Christ and his benefits; both are seals of the same covenant, are to be dispensed by ministers of the gospel, and to be continued in the Church of Christ until his second coming.”

From the PC(USA) Book of Common Worship: The Lord's Supper (also called Communion or the Eucharist) is a sacrament. A sacrament (which means mystery) is a special act of Christian worship which uses visible signs to present God's invisible grace to us in Jesus Christ. “By taking part in these actions we *remember* the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, give thanks to God, share God's love with one another, and look forward to the coming of God's reign in all its fullness. Before church governments were devised, before creeds were formalized, even before the first word of the New Testament was written, the Lord's Supper was firmly fixed at the heart of the Christian faith and life. From the church's inception, the Lord's Day and the Lord's Supper were joined.”

From Jesus Christ:

¹⁴ When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵ He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶ for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” ¹⁷ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸ for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” ¹⁹ Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰ And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

We have story, and we have creeds, confessions, and scriptures. What do they teach us? First of all, they teach us that the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist (which means thanksgiving), and communion, are about sharing: sharing in the gift that Jesus Christ gave us, a remembrance of himself, sharing it with one another communally, and sharing it with others. Secondly, they tell us that the Lord’s Supper is an important and fundamental action of Christian believers, practiced since Jesus instituted it with his friends two thousand years ago. Thirdly, they teach us that this sacrament is a mystery, that it isn’t something we can explain, but something that we believe. And fourthly, though by no means finally, they teach us that when we partake of the bread and cup, we are receiving more than simply bread and juice. We are being *spiritually* fed by the presence of Jesus Christ himself. Just as milk feeds an infant so that it can grow into maturity, so The Lord’s Supper feeds us as we grow in our discipleship.

What difference do these stories, creeds, confessions, and scripture make? The difference is that we do not recognize this sacrament as simply a re-enactment or memorial of the Last Supper. Instead, by it, we grow by Christ’s grace, and the Lord’s Supper is truly bread for our journeys. Just as the Hebrews took the unleavened bread with them on their exodus from Egypt, and just as God provided manna in the desert, the Lord’s Supper is the food for whatever paths we find ourselves on. Therefore, as Paul admonished the believers in Corinth, it is important that we prepare ourselves to come to the table. The Book of Order stipulates that if the sacrament is not received weekly, an announcement should be made each week previous to its celebration so that the people have time to prepare their hearts. That underscores how special this Sacrament is, and how easy it is to forget (when Jesus asked us to remember) what it is all about: Christ in us and we in Christ.

The best way I can explain the importance and gift of this sacrament is to remind you of two theological, very Protestant, terms: justification and sanctification. Justification is a fancy word that means saved by grace. Baptism is an act of justification. By God’s grace, and God’s grace alone, we are invited into the family of God. There is nothing we can do to earn our salvation. It is God’s gracious present to us.

Sanctification is a fancy word that means growing in the image of Christ, which we disciples are called to do. Every time we come to the Lord's Table and receive his spiritual presence, we are invited to grow in holiness through the gift of Christ's presence. Baptism brings us into the family. The Lord Supper gathers us around the big family table where we mature together in Christ. To think of the Lord's Supper as anything less is to diminish the gift, the grace, and Christ's command to remember his life, his sacrifice, and his resurrection: for us.

Let me end with a personal experience. I was raised in a church that had closed communion, which meant only those who were members of that particular denomination could receive communion. When I started dating my husband, who was Presbyterian, and took him to church, he was not invited to the table. He told me afterwards that he felt like someone crashing a party that he wasn't invited to. His statement had a big impact on me and on my own personal understanding of Jesus Christ and this sacrament. Nowhere in Scripture does it state that only those who belong to a particular denomination may receive the Lord's Supper. Nowhere does it state that one must be baptized to come to the table. Nowhere does it say that only a Minister of Word and Sacrament may administer the elements. Those are all human-made rules.

When we look at the multitude of stories about Jesus eating at the table, or out in a field, or on a lakeshore, we remember that he invites all sorts of people to dine with him—prostitutes and tax collectors; the outcast and those who are different; women; the rich and the poor; and even the one who would betray him. When we remember the parable about the wedding banquet and the invitations that were refused, we remember that we are the ragamuffins, the people on the streets, the broken and poor that Jesus himself invites to his table. His table is set as an example for us, his followers; a table of inclusion, a table of welcome, a table of hospitality. Without this reminder of whose we are and who we are to be like, we would be a very different, a very selfish, a very self-centered people.

Whether we are sinless or sinful, we are welcome here at the Lord's Table. Whether we are young or old, black or white, Republican or Democrat, cradle Presbyterians, converts, or new to the fold, we are welcome because it is not our table, it is Jesus' table. And we remember that because Jesus invites us to dine with him, we, too, are to invite others. The cup and the bread are the outward signs of the love of Jesus Christ; the grace we receive is the inner action. Theologian, pastor, and writer Frederick Buechner wrote that it doesn't matter what we believe about the Lord's Supper; what is important is the belief that the sacrament creates in us. So we come with open hands and open hearts. We come in Eucharist. We come in thanksgiving.

Thanks be to God.