

John 6:26-27, 32-35

August 5, 2018

1 Cor. 11: 23-32

“Do This In Remembrance of Me”

Last week, as I wrapped up the series of messages on the letters of John, I asked, “What is the greatest danger to your faith in Jesus?” And the answer for most of us is that there is not one great danger, but many - from temptations to immorality to spiritual pride. What can we do? The answer is found in **the “means of grace” —the Word and Sacraments.** The Scriptures tell us nothing can separate us from God’s love. The Sacraments remind us of God’s actions on our behalf. Jesus commanded us to remain faithful to the Word and His instructions. That’s why Christians have always studied the Bible and shared Holy Communion.

The most central act of Christian worship, throughout time and around the world, is Holy Communion. Whether it is called The Lord’s Supper, Holy Communion, Great Thanksgiving, Service of the Table, or Eucharist, you can go to any Christian church around the world today, or any Christian church in history, and if they were sharing the bread and cup in this manner and you would recognize it as Holy Communion.

Jesus never used the term “Holy Communion,” yet Holy Communion quickly became the central act of Christian worship. Why? It goes back to Jesus Himself, His actions a firmer foundation for the practice of Holy Communion than His words. St. Paul tells the Christians at Corinth: ***“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread...”*** 1 Cor. 11:23. **The church simply imitated the actions and obeyed the commandment of the Lord.** The Lord’s Supper was not debated or much written about in the early church. Christians simply experienced the Lord’s Supper, and experienced His presence through this act (read Luke 24:13-35). It’s called a “sacrament” because it is a specific symbol and sign used to re-enact the experience of God’s action. **St. Augustine** (354 – 430 AD) defined it: **“A sacrament is the visible form of an invisible grace.”**

Communion in Scripture

The Lord’s Supper has always been the hallmark of Christian worship because it comes from Jesus himself and it is attested to in Scripture. The Last Supper is reported in **Matt. 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-25, Luke 22:15-20 & 24:13-35.** In **1 Cor. 11:23-26** Paul explains to the congregation what Communion is all about. Mark’s words may be the most authentic to those of Jesus. Although John’s gospel contains a Last Supper narrative it has no words of institution or description of the details of the meal. However, John’s gospel is replete with eucharistic imagery (especially chap. 6) Jesus himself being the “bread of life.”

Acts 2:46 & 20:7-12 and **1 Cor. 11:20-30** give **glimpses of the sacred meal in the early Christian churches.** It appears that an entire meal was part of the celebration. The agape meal, or love feast, was common among early Christians. But continued abuse (as indicated in Paul's letter, 1 Cor. 11:33-34) led to its discontinuance.

What Does Holy Communion Mean For Us Today?

It means the same thing to us that it meant to the very first Christians, and to Christians around the world today. **It's a remembrance of the Last Supper,** Jesus' last meal with His disciples before he went to the Cross. He wanted them, and He wants us, to know just what God was and is doing for all people through His actions. God cares so much for us - even when we've done wrong things, behaved in bad ways, turned our backs on God – that He made a sacrifice on our behalf so that we could be reconciled to Him and made whole again. **It is a sign to us of God's new covenant with us,** His people, just as Jesus said at the Last Supper ***"In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you,'"*** Luke 22:20.

"The New Covenant" – what did He mean by that? It all started with a covenant, originally. The Bible tells the story of human origins and what happened after creation. God created us as thinking (sentient) beings with free will, designed for fellowship (communion) with Him. God's plan was that we were to live in harmony with Him, with one another, and with nature, and that we would want to do so. Now that would be Paradise! In a sense, God made a covenant with Adam and Eve, the first humans: they were given the garden of paradise, where they would not be plagued by fear of starvation or violence ... all theirs if they simply chose to obey God and walk in fellowship with Him. Unfortunately, they chose to spurn fellowship with God, to try to usurp His place as creator and definer of good and evil, and so there came a great rupture (the Fall) in humanity and all of creation, allowing sin, brokenness, and death to enter. Adam and Eve broke the first covenant, and ever since that rupture God has been seeking to bring humanity back to Him and the original intent He had in creating us. God's redemption culminated in Jesus, coming to earth, paying for the consequences of humanity's sinfulness, and establishing this New Covenant in Jesus. Through Him we all get a new chance to get right with God and have the kind of fellowship with Him that He intends. **Jesus,** the new Adam (the new human), chose of His own free will to obey God. He **gives all of us who've screwed up our lives, a "do over,"** this time with Him as our guide and strength to obey God.

So our Holy Communion is a reminder that God continues to redeem us from our fallen state, to bring us back to the Garden of Eden, if you will. It brings us ***"... to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel,"*** Hebrews 12:24.

Why Bread and Wine?

So, if this new covenant is so important, I mean like of cosmic significance, why did Jesus use bread and wine as symbols? Why not something bigger, more impressive, like say ... a rainbow or something? (Oh yeah, already been done). **Bread** has often been called **“the staff of life”** meaning that we depend on it (like leaning on a staff) to give us the energy to keep on living. Bread (and in the case of the Passover, flat bread) was a common, everyday food. And in a time and region where clean, pure water was not to be found, wine was the everyday drink. In a sense, when Jesus shared the bread and wine at the Last Supper, and called it His body and His blood, He was saying, “Take me as your staff of life. Let me be your food and drink that you take in everyday. So every time you eat and drink you’ll remember to include me in your living.” **The ordinary things of life found in our everyday lives ... that’s where Jesus wants us to live in this new covenant.** [The bread and wine also have deep meaning, representing the Passover lamb, body and blood, symbolic of the Israelites escape from slavery in Egypt which culminated in the Covenant of Moses that God made with the people at Sinai ... but more on this at a later date].

Why Do We Have Communion The Way We Do?

There is variation among Christians concerning how the Lord’s Supper is administered and how often. Some drink from the cup, some dip bread or wafer in the cup, others use little, individual cups, some remain seated in the pews and pass the elements along while others walk to the communion servers. Much of the **variation is due to tradition or local custom, and not because of theological disputes.** From earliest times, this Sacrament was and is usually shared among Christian congregations weekly. That is still the case in many churches we know: Roman Catholic, Anglican, many Lutheran churches. Why do we, and so many other Methodist churches, have communion once a month? Methodism is the offspring of the Anglican Church (Church of England) where the Lord’s Supper is shared every Sunday. In their earliest inception the Methodist societies in England expected their members to attend Sunday service at the local Anglican Church and so receive Communion weekly.

But things changed in America. Methodists were spread across the growing frontier and often quite far from the nearest Anglican Church. After American independence Methodists formed their own church, but because of frontier distances there was not a Methodist pastor at every congregation. In fact, it was very common for three or more congregations to share the leadership of one pastor, who went from church to church in a circuit, which could take a month or more. Since it was the responsibility of the pastor to preside over Holy Communion they had to wait until he arrived. So the practice

developed of having Communion once a quarter. (In some other denominations today, Holy Communion is celebrated once or twice a year.) Beginning in the 1970's Methodist churches, in an attempt to return to tradition, began having Communion once a month.

In some Christian denominations (principally Disciples of Christ) the lay people can preside over Holy Communion. Why does the UMC require that only clergy preside over communion? In our polity it is the responsibility of the pastor "... to administer ... the Supper of the Lord according to Christ's ordinance," (BoD ¶340.2b(1)). Though not expressly forbidden to lay people, the BoD always infers that pastors preside and lay people assist. I believe this stems from the tradition and belief that those who have been officially designated and trained – i.e. clergy – should be responsible for administering this most central act in Christian worship in a fitting manner. "Every Christian pastor is enlisted on behalf of the apostolic tradition to break bread fittingly for the community," Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology*, (Harper San Francisco, 1983), 118.

Obedience to Christ's Command

John Wesley said this: "*Do this in remembrance of me* -- by which, as the apostles were obliged to bless, break, and give the bread to all that joined with them in these holy things, so were all Christians obliged to receive these signs of Christ's body and blood."

Jesus never said, "Remember my birth," but He did say to remember His death and to eat the bread and drink the wine "*in remembrance of me.*" He also said, "*I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom,*" Matt. 26:29. And so, all Christians continue to follow His instructions as they await His coming in final victory over sin and death, and we are fully restored to the original goodness of God's creation.

"... Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty,'" John 6:35.