

What is Holy Communion?

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

September 3, 2017

Welcome again to worship today. It's so good to be together. This is a wonderful place and wonderful people to share worship. But not all churches are like this.

"Top 10 Ways You Know You're In A Bad Church."

10. The church bus has gun racks.
9. The church staff consists of Senior Pastor, Associate Pastor and Socio-pastor.
8. The Bible they use is the "Dr. Seuss Version."
7. There's a tattoo artist in the lobby.
6. The choir wears leather robes.
5. Worship services are BYOS - "Bring your own snake."
4. The only song the organist knows is "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida."
3. Karaoke Worship Time
2. Ushers ask, "Smoking or non-smoking?"
1. No cover charge, but communion is a two-drink minimum.

Today, I want to talk about Holy Communion. That's right, Holy Communion... in September. Occasionally, I'll talk a little bit about Holy Communion on Maundy Thursday, but now... today?

Yes, today, because Holy Communion is part of our regular worship, and we should understand what we believe about this part of our worship, and not just do it when it shows up, or have, what I've seen in every church I have served, a decline in attendance on Communion Sunday. That's right, except for 2 years since 2011, average attendance on Communion Sunday is about 7 persons less than the year average. There are persons who don't come to worship on Communion Sunday, so we should talk about why Communion is so important.

To be honest, when I was a teenager going up in my church, I didn't think much of communion. My church was what I called a Methi-Baptist Church.

COMMUNION AT GRACE

It wasn't until later in my studies of Scripture and theology in seminary that I realized that Holy Communion was more than what I experienced growing up.

I want to invite you to turn in your bulletin to page 5 as we study from 1 Corinthians 11:23-29. Part of this I'm sure you've heard before; the other part, not so much.

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 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." 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." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.¹

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 (NIV)

It's this passage, not the Gospel accounts, that churches based their communion practice upon. Various Christian traditions refer to this sacrament by different names, including Holy Communion, the Lord's Table, the Eucharist (which comes from a Greek word that means "grateful" or "thanksgiving"), the Divine Liturgy (in Eastern Orthodox tradition), and of course the Mass in Roman Catholic and some Lutheran Churches.

Holy Communion is known as a sacrament.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said that a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

Sacraments involve our senses through outward and visible signs, while at the same time, they involve our spiritual senses through an inward and spiritual work of grace.

Now, the number of sacraments celebrated within the Church varies according to the teaching of the particular tradition or denomination. Most Christians recognize 2 sacraments: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (or Holy Communion).

Some churches consider other rites or practices to be sacraments as well. Since the Council of Trent back in the 16th Century, the Roman Catholic Church has celebrated 7 sacraments. In addition to Baptism and the Lord's Supper, they also recognize penance or confession, marriage, holy orders (ordination), confirmation, and healing (also known as extreme unction, the last rites, or anointing of the sick or dying). Another denomination recognizes Foot Washing as a sacrament.

But in the United Methodist Church, we recognize only two sacraments: baptism and communion. And there are two reasons why.

First, Jesus did them. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist and He celebrated Communion at the Last Supper.

Second, Jesus commanded us to do them. In the Great Commission passage in Matthew 28, Jesus says,

*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*²

This is a command. He also commanded us to take Holy Communion. At the Last Supper, Jesus told the disciples to take the bread and drink from the cup "all of you."³

So what is this thing we call Holy Communion all about?

Well, the bread represents the Body of Christ.

VERSAILLES "SPECIAL BREAD"

Well, the bread represents the Body of Christ. That may sound pretty simplistic. Everyone knows that. But let's look at it deeper than that.

In John 6, Jesus is in the Temple. And at the climactic moment during the Festival of the Tabernacles, He stood up and said these words:

"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty... I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If

² Matthew 28:19 (NIV)

³ See Matthew 26:26-27 (NIV)

anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”⁴

Jesus used the imagery of His body being bread long before the Last Supper.

How can Jesus give us his flesh as bread to eat? To eat living bread means to accept Christ into our lives and become united with him. We are united with Christ in two ways. First, by believing in His death (the sacrifice of His flesh) and resurrection, and second, by devoting ourselves to living as He requires, depending on His teaching for guidance and trusting in the Holy Spirit for power.⁵

And of course, the cup’s contents represent the Blood of Christ.

On Maundy Thursday, Jesus said,

*This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*⁶

In order for sin to be forgiven, a blood sacrifice was required. In the old sacramental system, the person would bring an animal – typically a lamb or a bull – to be sacrificed. They would place their hands on the animal as well as the priest, and its throat would be slit, and the blood would pour out. The person would realize in graphic detail the cost of their sin, and if they had any heart at all, they would seek to be more righteous in their living.

So likewise, when we realize the cost that had to be paid for the remission of our sins – Jesus’ innocent blood – then we too might humbly repent and seek not to sin again.

Now, the purpose of partaking in Holy Communion is to remember Jesus and to proclaim His death.

Back to 1 Corinthians 11:24-25:

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.” 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.”⁷

So first when we partake in Communion, we are to remember Jesus. Remember what He did for us, the sacrifice of His life for us. We remember the cross when we take communion.

But it’s more than simply remembering Jesus. Paul adds in verse 26:

*For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*⁸

The Lord’s Supper is a visible sermon that proclaims the message of the Cross, that is, the reality of the Lord’s death, and also the certainty of His return (“until He comes”).

And this is the key to the Christian faith. Romans 5:8 reads:

*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*⁹

⁴ John 6:35, 48-51 (NIV)

⁵ Life Application Study Bible, John 6:51

⁶ Matthew 26:28 (NIV)

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:24-25 (NIV)

⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:26 (NIV)

⁹ Romans 5:8 (NIV)

Now, what is communion in our United Methodist tradition? Some people would say, “Well, it’s once a month.” John Wesley didn’t say only once a month. In fact, he told the people that would become Methodists to celebrate communion often. So why did communion become a once-a-month tradition in United Methodist churches?

CIRCUIT RIDER

Really, communion in the United Methodist Church is open. We believe that sharing in communion is a means of grace moment, when the grace of God is apparent, and that a sinner might repent when faced with the knowledge that the broken loaf and the cup represents the death and resurrection of Christ. So every time we share communion, you hear me say that you don’t have to be a member of this church to share in communion. That is not the case in other faith traditions; you have to be a member of their church, in like mind with what they believe about communion, before you can take it with them.

These traditions are taking very seriously the verses we generally skip in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29:

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.¹⁰

Paul tells us that before partaking in Communion, one must examine themselves.

This passage talks about taking communion unworthily. The unworthiness consisted in people who took communion and did not “discern the Lord’s body.” I think it means that the person who eats and drinks unworthily does not realize what the sacred symbols mean. It may mean that they eat and drink with no reverence and no sense of the love that these symbols stand for or the obligation that is laid upon them.

However, this does not mean that a sinner cannot take communion; it is because of Christ’s sacrifice represented in the bread and the cup that any of us can be saved. An old minister seeing an old woman hesitate to receive the cup, stretched it out to her, saying, “Take it, woman; it’s for sinners; it’s for you and me.” If the Table of Christ were only for perfect people, none might ever approach it. The way is never closed to the penitent sinner. To the person who loves God and their neighbor as themselves, the way is always open, and their sins, though they be as scarlet, can be white as snow.

Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion during His Last Supper with His disciples, commanding them to continue it in remembrance of Him. His Last Supper before He was crucified. Later, the first supper after the Resurrection, Jesus shared a meal with the men who had been on the road to Emmaus. When He broke the bread, their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him.

Since the time of the earliest Christians, disciples have shared in this sacramental meal that re-presents the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to all who come to receive in faith. It is a coming to the banquet table of God, a Means of Grace, where we experience the inward and spiritual grace conveyed to us through these outward and visible elements of bread and wine.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 (NIV)

And it is at this table we can catch a glimpse of the way God intends for the world to be – with all of God’s children sharing the bread of life and the cup of salvation together in spiritual gratitude and love for God and for one another.