

What is Holy Communion?

1 Corinthians 11:23-29

October 3, 2021

Welcome again to worship today. It's so good to be together.

Myra and I were away last Sunday. For our son Matt's 30th birthday, we flew to Nashville to see his favorite football team – the Tennessee Titans – in a home game. And we picked last Sunday because Matt's team was playing Myra's team – the Indianapolis Colts. The birthday boy's team won.

We will also be gone next Sunday as well. On Saturday, we fly to Florida for a family vacation that was postponed from last year due to COVID. We will spend the week in the Orlando area, coming back the following Saturday. So Kathy is going to preach two weeks in a row. I couldn't ask her to preach 3 out of 4 Sundays; that's why I asked Wendy to come last week. But I know that Kathy will be wonderful as she shares what the Lord has laid on her heart.

But I'm glad we are here today in such 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... on World Communion Sunday. Folks, I'm sure I will get the most creative sermon of the year award after this one.

Of course, 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. 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

It’s this passage, not the Gospel accounts, that churches based their communion liturgy 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.

Let’s look and see what Paul says about this very important ritual.

Well, the bread represents the **Body of Christ**.

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.”²

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 anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”³

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 His 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.⁴

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

Verse 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.”⁵

On Maundy Thursday, Jesus said,

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

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:23-29 (NIV)

² 1 Corinthians 11:23-24 (NIV)

³ John 6:35, 48-51 (NIV)

⁴ Life Application Study Bible, John 6:51

⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:25 (NIV)

⁶ Matthew 26:28 (NIV)

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

One more thing Paul says about communion. Verses 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.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:24-25 (NIV)

⁸ 1 Corinthians 11:26 (NIV)

⁹ Romans 5:8 (NIV)

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 (NIV)

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.

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

Holy Communion is known as a sacrament.

John Wesley 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 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.

It is a **means of grace**.

What do I mean by that? I mean that communion is a way God reaches into our lives, through grace, to bring us closer to Him. I don't know about you, but when I take communion, I feel closer to God. In remembering what Christ has done for me, I feel gratitude in my heart, as well as a love for God, for Christ died for us because of His love.

John 15:13 reads:

Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.¹¹

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.

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.

¹¹ John 15:13 (NIV)