

May 6, 2018

The Sacraments

Why is Communion so Important?

Mark 14:17-26

Opening words: Saint Augustine once said, "*A sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace.*" Many believers view the sacraments as a visible symbol of the reality of God, as well as a means by which God enacts his grace. Both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church recognize seven sacraments: Baptism, Confession, Communion, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders, and Anointing the Sick. Protestant denominations, including the United Methodist Church, identify two sacraments instituted by Christ: Communion and Baptism.

This is Communion Sunday. This is not your only opportunity to partake of the elements this year. We offer communion on the first Sunday of each month. If you add in communion on the sacred days in the life of the church and the Wednesday dinners during Lent, we offer communion approximately twenty times a year. I was raised in a denomination which offered communion over fifty times a year. The question is not availability. The question is understanding. Do you completely understand what you are about to do? Our Gospel lesson for this morning is familiar, Mark 14:17-26. Let me call this message *Why is Communion so Important?*

Mark 14:17-26 When evening came, Jesus arrived with the Twelve. ¹⁸ While they were reclining at the table eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me—one who is eating with me."

¹⁹ They were saddened, and one by one they said to him, "Surely you don't mean me?"

²⁰ "It is one of the Twelve," he replied, "one who dips bread into the bowl with me. ²¹ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

²² While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take it; this is my body."

²³ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it.

²⁴ "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many," he said to them. ²⁵ "Truly I tell you, I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."

²⁶ When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Pope Pius X once said, "*Holy Communion is the short and safest way to heaven.*" I am not sure I can completely agree with that quote, but it makes me think. If it makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

We are in the fourteenth chapter of Mark. It is Thursday of Holy Week, so much has already happened. The events of Palm Sunday are nothing more than a memory. The tables of the money changers are now right side up. The fig tree has been cursed and is now nothing more than kindling. The great lessons of Holy Wednesday have been taught. There is no other way to say it: The end is near. There is only time for one last meal with the disciples. It would be the last time Jesus would be with all the disciples. Everything was about to change. However, it wasn't just any meal. It was the Seder. You know the Seder. It was a meal with a message. Every item on the menu represented something from their shared Jewish past. Every word was scripted so the youngest would remember. That is why what Jesus did was so shocking. He changed the ritual and created something new.

You remember what Jesus said, and you remember what Jesus did. He picked up a common piece of bread and broke it. He passed the two halves to the disciples, who were seated around him. That bread presented his body, which would soon be broken for them. Then, he did something which must have disturbed the temperance movement of his day. He picked up a glass of wine and shared it with the disciples. It represented his blood. They understood blood to be the life-giving agent within the human body. Without much fanfare, it was over. The meal was over, and the mess was cleaned up. With those simple words and with those simple actions, the greatest memorial in the history of the world was created. One of the reasons it is considered great is that it is so easy to imagine. There is nothing complex about the Upper Room scene. If you agree with me, say, "**Amen!**" It is not complex, but we have made it complex.

Karl Barth (1886-1968) once said, "*The word became flesh, and then through theologians it became words again.*" For years, theologians have tried to tell us what communion means. I remember, sitting in class and studying the words *transubstantiation* and *consubstantiation*. The Roman Catholic tradition believes that in transubstantiation, the bread and the wine mystically turn into the actual body and blood of Christ. That happens when the bell is rung. The mainline Protestant tradition believes in consubstantiation. The bread and the wine, or juice, *represent* the body and the blood of Christ. Theologians tell us there is a world of difference between the two. I will be completely honest with you. I don't completely understand the difference, but I do know theologians have complicated this simple scene by trying to tell us what it means.

Well-meaning laity have complicated communion by telling us how they like it served. Some like it weekly. Some like it monthly. Some like it quarterly. One woman told me we should only offer communion once a year, on Christmas Eve at the 11:00 service. Some like it sitting in the pews. Some like it at the rail. Some don't like it at the rail because it discriminates against those who can't bend their knees. Some like the little cups and the little cubes of bread. Some like intinction, when you tear off your own piece of bread and dip it into the common cup. Some are repulsed by intinction because

of germs. Some think long, complex liturgy should accompany communion, and others don't want any liturgy at all. Well-meaning laity have complicated communion by telling us how they prefer it. From my position in life, I can tell you the truth. There is no way to keep everyone happy. The truth be told, I have grown tired of trying. If you will agree it is impossible to keep everyone happy, say, "**Amen!**" However, the question for today is not how communion should be served or what does communion mean. This is the question for today:

Why is communion so important? The answer is not hidden in academics or personal opinions. The answer to the question is hidden in the scriptures themselves. Jesus himself tells us why communion is so important. Look at the text with me. Hidden inside of communion are three requirements.

Communion requires us to remember Jesus! It was Jesus himself who connected the bread and the wine to him. In verse 22 and verse 24, Jesus says, this is my body and blood. Like the rest of us, Jesus didn't want to be forgotten once he was gone. Jesus wanted to be remembered. This is the question you must answer:

What do you remember about Jesus, as you partake of his body and blood? Do you remember his humble birth? Do you remember his baptism, when his earthly ministry began? Do you remember the lessons from the Sermon on the Mount? Do you remember his miracles? The blind that could suddenly see. The lame that could suddenly walk. The demonic who were suddenly whole. Or perhaps, you remember the resurrection of Lazarus? Do you remember how Jesus was able to control weather or the way he walked on the water? Do you remember Jesus hanging on the cross, twisted in pain for your salvation? He died so that salvation was possible for all. It is a fair question. What do you remember about Jesus, as you partake of his body and blood? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

It is hard to believe Easter was a month ago. Time goes fast! One of the highlights for me this year was participating in the Living Last Supper. I received my part at the dress rehearsal, the night prior to the performance. I played the part of John, the disciple whom Jesus loved. Someone asked me, who was my favorite disciple? The question caught me off guard. Except for Judas Iscariot, who I have always pitied, I admire all the disciples. I was sharing my opinion in the narthex, still wearing my costume. My emotions caught me off guard. As I said, "They (the disciples) did so much for God, and I have done so little," I was suddenly filled with emotion, and I found myself starting to cry. Don't miss the next line.

Communion requires us to examine our present condition! If it is true of the disciples, then it is even truer of Jesus. He was a man who lived the perfect life; he had the perfect relationship with God. It doesn't need to be said, but I will say it: Jesus did so much, Jesus sacrificed so much, but in comparison, we have done so little. There is no comparison between us and Jesus. Yet, the Master invites us to partake. If you are

not humbled at the communion table, then you have a great spiritual problem. That is what Paul is saying in I Corinthians 11:27, *"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."* Communion is important because it humbles us. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"** This is the final reason communion is so important:

Communion requires us to examine our eternity! In the scripture lesson, Jesus isn't just embracing the moment. Jesus is forcing the disciples to examine their eternity. Verse 25 says, *"I will tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it anew in the Kingdom of God."* Jesus is not just speaking of his own eternity. He is speaking of the disciple's eternity. Let me say it clearly. By his invitation to us to sit at the table with him, Jesus is speaking of our eternity; your eternity. Where do you want to spend eternity? You have two options, heaven and hell. Jesus is your only hope of salvation. Do you know Jesus as your Lord and Savior? How worthy are you to sit at the table with Jesus? Communion requires us to examine our eternity! And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

Can I end this message with a confession? Communion always reminds me of my mother. It was a memorable day in my life. I must have been twelve years old and insecure. I was sitting next to her, like I did every Sunday morning. The communion elements were being passed through the pews. First came the bread. My mother passed the little wicker basket filled with small pieces of bread to me. Then came the tray filled with the tiny cups filled with grape juice. As I was taking my cup, something went wrong. I spilled my grape juice all over my mother's new yellow dress. It has been nearly fifty years, but I still remember the look on her face. It was a combination of shock and disappointment. I remember, I wanted to run away, but that was not an option. Filled with emotion, my mother wiped her newly stained dress, looked at me and said, "Russell, it was an accident. Dresses can be replaced easily." This is the truth. To this day my hands still shake when I pass the elements. I was ashamed. Can I ask you a question?

What do you remember when you partake of the body and blood of Christ? There is nothing wrong with remembering a departed loved one, but it is more important to remember Jesus. As a matter of fact, communion requires us to remember Jesus. Communion requires us to examine our present condition. Communion requires us to examine our eternity. There is very little nutritional value in the small amount of bread and juice you are about to consume. However, there is a spiritual value that will change the way you look at yourself and your eternity. Pope Pius X wasn't wrong. He once said, *"Holy Communion is the shortest and safest way to heaven."* And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**