

Why Communion

Matthew 26:26-28, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

May 7, 2017

In our sermon series on "Why" we are attempting to answer some very hard questions of our faith and what we believe. The first week we talked about "Why Jesus." We talked about the central place of Jesus in our lives and that Jesus is the foundation of our faith and eternal life. Last week we talked about "Why Church." Church attendance is very generational and the generations before us were all raised on the idea that church is just something you 'must' do on Sunday morning. Then in the 70's and 80's a generation decided to drop out of the church when what they heard about in church didn't match what they saw people doing outside of church...sound familiar? So, the children of that generation, Generation X and Millennials, were not raised going to church and you often hear things like – you can be spiritual, or faithful, or a believer without going to church. Last week we talked about the importance of worshipping with others to ground yourself in the faith.

Today we ask the question, "Why Communion." Communion is something we do every first Sunday of the month. And while we do not believe that it is Christ's very body and blood. We do believe that Jesus is very real and very present via the presence and power of the Holy Spirit; the bread is not just bread and the juice is not just juice. For us, as UM's, communion means that Jesus is present in the elements and in what is going on in the community. It is special, something transformed from the ordinary to the extra-ordinary.

It is very interesting that our official names for communion help define the unique aspects of what communion means. You can't put communion in a box - it has a very large range of meanings. ...

The Eucharist – is often considered the 'catholic' term for communion, but the Latin and Greek word literally means Thanksgiving. In the UMC Book of Worship and Hymnal, we call it the Great Thanksgiving. Calling communion "the Eucharist," means we remember that it is a time of thanksgiving – here at the altar we find forgiveness of our sins and eternal life because of what Christ did. This is something to give thanks for and to truly celebrate.

Holy Communion - is the term most often used by us Protestants and is a reminder that when we take Communion we actually commune with Jesus Christ. This is a holy time where we commune with Jesus Christ who told us to do this until he returns as a way to remember him.

Lord's/Last Supper - This term has the richest meaning of them all. The Last Supper is what Jesus was celebrating with his disciples and it was Jesus transforming the feast of Passover into a new celebration. Passover was a remembrance when the lamb was slaughtered and death passed over the Hebrew male children and then God led them out of Egypt and out of slavery. And so, every year the Jews celebrate their freedom from slavery at Passover. And in the middle of this very rich feast, Jesus stood up and reinterpreted that feast through his life, death and resurrection. He now is our Lamb – he was slaughtered and died on the cross so that we can stand before God.

In a way, the laws of physics are broken when we celebrate the Lord's Supper because this sacrament has implications on our past, our present and our future.

First, it points to **What God has done - past**

The defining moment in Jewish history is when God led the people out of Egypt, they were rescued from slavery and crossed the Red Sea. During that time, God travelled behind them and before them in a pillar of fire and cloud of smoke. They wandered for 40 years and God never left them, providing everything they

needed to eat. The last plague before the Exodus and deliverance from slavery was the death of the firstborn of Egypt. So that the Hebrew sons were saved, a pure first born lamb had to be slaughtered and the blood placed on the doorpost of each Israelite family. This was the first Passover – when the spirit of death passed over and the Israelites were released from captivity. And every year after the original Passover, an animal had to be sacrificed to atone for sins and stand in the place of the one who should have died. And so, during the Passover celebration, Jesus took the bread and cup and placed himself into the Passover celebration. So, when he says, ***"Take this and eat it, for this is my body."***²⁷ ***And he took a cup of wine and gave thanks to God for it. He gave it to them and said, "Each of you drink from it,"***²⁸ ***for this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice to forgive the sins of many."***, Jesus now stands in that gap and is a 'new' **Passover Lamb**.

Up until Jesus' death, Judaism held to a biblical sacrificial system that required the death of an animal to stand in the place of sin. And it was like this until 70 AD with the destruction of the Temple. But, for Christians, we believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins. His death in the past, 2000 years ago, stands in the place of those sacrifices.

We don't need any sort of animal sacrifices because God has given us the greatest one-time sacrifice in the form of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus' death on the cross 2000 years ago stands in our place and conquers sin and death.

- **One-time sacrifice to conquer sin and death**

And because of that onetime sacrifice of Jesus dying on the cross, taking Holy Communion not only is about something that happened in the past but, is about what God is doing you our lives today, right now, in the present.

What God is doing - present

When we take communion, when you come forward and get a bit of the bread and dip it in the cup – you celebrate the fact that your sins are forgiven. We can try to play all sorts of games – nah, God couldn't possibly forgive that. No way, you don't know where I've been. Jesus' death on the cross 2000 years ago --- his past action --- is very real in this very moment of remembering. His forgiveness was not just for those who sat at that first Last Supper or saw him die. He says to each one of us that you too can have **Forgiveness of sins**.

And then here is another amazing and beautiful thing about this meal. Yes, it is based on what Jesus did 2000 years ago, and yes our sins are forgiven and then...we are sent out to tell so many others about his message. This meal is our literal food to carry his message into the world. **Fuel to follow Jesus**. Paul reminds us of this important aspect in 1 Corinthians, ***For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until he comes again.***

And because of Jesus' death on the cross, our participation through Holy Communion, this moment when we receive the bread and cup also has future implications. **What God will do – future**. It means that we confess our sins before God, we are offered total and complete forgiveness and have the opportunity to step into eternal life. As I mentioned before, prior to Jesus' death on the cross, animal sacrifice was needed. As

Christians, because Christ died and rose again – we are offered eternal life. **Eternal Life.** When we take communion, we are celebrating and thanking Jesus for offering us what is yet to come.

Over and over again in the New Testament, Jesus speaks about the kingdom of Heaven. This Kingdom will have a banquet attached. And the heavenly banquet is opened up to those who say yes to the King. When you come forward and eat and drink – those moments are a mere foretaste of what you will experience at the banquet in heaven that God has for us. **Heavenly Banquet.** This moment, here and now, is God saying --- guess what I've got in store for you. This moment is temporary and I've got eternity waiting.

A serious part of Communion is the recognition that Jesus forgives all our sins. Yet in our belief, it takes an effort on our part. For millennia, the Communion liturgy has included a moment for us to confess our sins. This is our time to recognize where we have fallen short, where we have disobeyed God, where we have failed to love God, where we have turned our back on our neighbors or chosen our will over that of others and especially God. So this morning let us take a moment of silence to confess our sins.

[this traditional liturgical prayer may be used]

***Merciful God,
we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart.
We have failed to be an obedient church.
We have not done your will,
we have broken your law,
we have rebelled against your love,
we have not loved our neighbors,
and we have not heard the cry of the needy.
Forgive us, we pray.
Free us for joyful obedience,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.***

God, I confess before you ...

And so, communion isn't just something here and now for us to partake in. It is also future in how it directs our lives.

How will I live as a forgiven and sent child of God?