

WHY COMMUNION??

SCRIPTURE: 1 Corinthians 11:23-34

Seeing that today we will be celebrating communion together as a family, whether in-person or on-line, I would like to take this time and talk about communion, which is considered one of two sacraments of the Protestant reformation. It was that remnant that came out of the Roman Catholic Church back in the 16th century. The easiest way to remember what a sacrament is that these sacraments are visible symbols of the reality of God and faith in Jesus Christ. Within the Protestant churches these are baptism and communion.

Early church leaders defined these as outward and visible signs of God's inward or invisible grace. To say it another way, they are outward signs of something that God is doing within a person's life. And probably the simplest definition concerning communion being a sacrament is that it is a dramatization of the gospel message.

Unfortunately, communion has taken a serious hit within some churches having removed it from their worship experience saying that it is considered a strange practice and often time frightens away those who are "seekers."

But this was not the case with the first church, as they partook of communion on a regular basis. We see this in Luke's account of the first church saying, "***And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.***" Acts 2:42

This phrase, "breaking of bread," was understood by the first church, and the Christian church throughout the ages, as what we know as communion, or more formally as "The Lord's Supper," which was instituted by Jesus at the last Passover meal He shared with His disciples as found in the synoptic gospel accounts (Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:7-23), and in the Apostle Paul's account of it in 1 Corinthians 11:23-28.

Now, a problem with communion as it is taken today is that it has become more centered upon tradition, and something that the church just does, without really knowing why.

To explain what I mean, there's a story about a little girl who asked her mother, "Mommy, why do you cut the ends off meat before you cook it?"

The girl's mother said it added flavour by allowing the meat to better absorb the spices, but she also told her daughter to ask her grandmother since she always did it that way.

So the little girl found her grandmother and asked, "Grandma, why do you and Mommy cut the ends of the meat off before you cook it?"

Her grandmother said, "I think it allows the meat to stay tender because it soaks up the juices better, but why don't you ask your Nana? After all, I learned from her, and she always did it that way."

Getting a little frustrated the little girl climbed in her great-grandma's lap and asked, "Nana, why do you cut the ends off the meat before you cook it?"

Nana answered, "I had to; my cooking pot wasn't big enough."

We do a lot of things in life, and seldom do we stop to ask why. We develop habits and traditions, and if we're not careful, we can forget why we do certain things. The danger of familiar traditions is that they become routine and lose the power they were intended to impart.

So, in our time together today, and before we participate in communion, I'd like to take a little time to explain what so many of us take for granted, or do not fully understand its significance.

But to do so, I'd like to tell you a story about a statue of a lamb that stands in the courtyard of a little church in Germany.

A group of men were working on the church's roof when one of them tripped and fell to the ground. The other men quickly climbed down the ladder thinking that their colleague was either severely injured or dead.

When they reached him he was shaken but uninjured. You see, there was a lamb grazing next to the church when he fell, and instead of hitting the ground, he fell on the lamb. Unfortunately for the lamb it was crushed and died.

Grateful for the lamb's intervention, the man had a statue of a lamb erected in the very place where he fell. The plaque underneath reads, "Memorial to the Crushed Lamb."

In essence, this is what the Lord's Supper, or Communion is all about. It's about Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, and it is a memorial to remember how He was crushed for our sins so that we can live for eternity.

And so, how important is communion and our participation in it? In Luke's gospel, Jesus said, ***"Do this in remembrance of Me." Luke 22:19***

From this phrase we see two important elements.

IT IS A COMMAND

Jesus said, “Do this.” Therefore, Jesus didn’t make this an optional exercise on the part of His followers; instead, He made it into a command. How important is this command that we keep it? Well, Jesus said in the Great Commission that we were not only to go into the whole world and make disciples, but He also said,

“Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Matthew 28:20

And so, this command of Jesus to partake of communion is to be observed by the church until the end.

IT IS A MEMORIAL

A memorial is something that is done, or something that is built as a remembrance of something that is to be preserved throughout time.

So the observance of communion is something I believe Jesus wants us to remember as to the grace God has given to us through Jesus’s sacrifice upon the cross for our sins.

We are to remember how this is a part of God’s redemptive plan for humanity, declaring that Jesus is our Savior and Redeemer.

And so, Jesus gave us this sacrament of communion as a commandment to be kept so that we would remember what He did for us upon the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. Basically, Jesus gave to us, through this enactment, a visual display of the gospel message He told us to share with the world.

Now, what I find amazing is that given enough time, religion can actually squeeze the life out of the reality. Throughout the centuries, religion has taken the wonderful grace that God has extended and boxed it up into meaningless and powerless rituals.

And this is something the church has done to what Jesus asked us to remember. Since it is Paul’s account of what Jesus did, and how he gave this to the church to follow, this is what the church today declares at this time of communion. So, let’s take a look at what Paul said, which the same wording that is also found in Luke’s gospel.

“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.’ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as

often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.” 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

There is something about Jesus’s body and blood that He wants us to remember. But what is it exactly? There are two possibilities. We can remember the process of His dying, or we can remember the purpose of His death.

Many talk about the process of how Jesus died. And I’m not saying this isn’t important, because Jesus knew the pain and agony that awaited Him at the cross. This is where we get our English word, “excruciating.” “Excruciating,” means “out of the cross.” It is the unbelievable pain experienced when someone is executed upon a cross. The cross is actually the most painful form of execution ever devised. But the pain Jesus underwent was even greater, because there was added to the intense physical pain, intense emotional pain as well. For the first time since before time began, the relationship between Jesus and the Father was broken. What severed that relationship was our sins that He willingly took upon Himself. And while the process of Jesus’s death is important to understand, this is not what I think Jesus wants us to remember.

Before we look at the other option, that is, Jesus’ purpose. It might be beneficial to get a bit of background as to why the Apostle Paul had to talk about this in the first place.

It seemed that religion started to change the reality of what the sacrament of communion truly meant. Paul spent around 18 months pastoring in Corinth. But after he left, and over a period of time, they turned the Lord’s Supper into a boxed lunch social, making a total mess out of it.

What was happening in the Corinthian Church is that they were gathering for a meal that had nothing to do with communion but called it that. In fact, it wasn’t even a potluck. Instead, they hoarded food for themselves and didn’t share with those in need. Further, they brought wine, but were getting somewhat inebriated. Their celebration brought out the worst, as divisions and greed marked this sacred ceremony.

Now, the second possibility to what Jesus asked us to remember is then the purpose of His death. This, I believe, best fits what Paul goes on to say in how we are to prepare ourselves to partake.

AN EXAMINATION

“But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” (1 Corinthians 11:28)

The word, “examine,” is where we get the idea and word for passing a test. Often times when we examine ourselves during communion it’s about checking ourselves as to what sins we may have committed, and then taking the time to confess, asking God to forgive us.

And while we should be looking at our lives and asking forgiveness for our sins, this doesn’t go along with what the word examine means.

We aren’t to test ourselves as to whether or not we’re sinners. Because guess what, we are. The Bible says that ***all have sinned and have fallen short of God’s glory, that is, short of God’s holy and righteous standards for life (Romans 3:23).***

Nor are we to test ourselves as to how good we are, because the Bible says that ***there is no one who is good enough, because no one is righteous (Romans 3:10-12).*** Nor is it about whether or not we deserve God’s grace, because grace is receiving from God that which we don’t deserve, which is our salvation and forgiveness. ***Paul says that we are saved by God’s grace through faith, and not from anything that we may do to achieve it (Ephesians 2:8-9).***

So, what are we to test ourselves on? I believe that we test ourselves upon what Jesus did for us upon the cross. It is to remember what Jesus accomplished for us upon the cross, not whether or not we deserve to participate.

This brings us to the statement Paul made in the prior verse.

“Whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 11:27)

What does it mean in an unworthy manner? There are some churches that withhold communion from those they consider to be sinners. Also, in different church cultures around the world, communion is withheld from those who have been divorced.

Personally, I think that is messed up and backwards. It’s when we’re weak that we need to receive spiritual sustenance. It’s not right to say to people who are weak and frail that they can’t come to the table that’s intended to provide strength. It’s like saying to a person dying of malnutrition, “When you get over your malnutrition then you can have something to eat.”

So, the question becomes, “Who is worthy?” The answer, “No one.” **There was and is only one person who fits this bill**, and that is Jesus Christ. Look at what the angels, living creatures, and the saints sing in heaven.

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing.” Revelation 5:12

The Bible makes it clear that there is no one who is righteous, no not one.

“For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin.”
(Ecclesiastes 7:20)

Once again, the only one who was and is worthy is Jesus Christ. Therefore, if we go with the explanation that only those who are worthy can partake of communion, then nobody would partake.

I remember something Jack Hayford wrote years ago.

“Jesus died to shower the grace of God upon us that we might all come through Him who is worthy.” (Jack Hayford)

We are to come to the Lord’s Table putting our complete faith and trust in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who is worthy. So to partake in a worthy manner is to acknowledge that only Jesus Christ is worthy and has made us worthy through our faith in His sacrificial death upon the cross, and the grace He extended to all who believe.

We have therefore been made worthy through Jesus’s sacrifice and the blood He shed for the forgiveness of sin. Therefore, we come to the table remembering His worthiness of what He did for us, not in our ability to make ourselves worthy, which we have seen is impossible.

Now, with this in mind, how are we to approach verses 29 and 30?

“For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason, many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.” 1 Corinthians 1:29-30

This has been a stumbling block for many, and while there are many various explanations, let me weigh in on what I believe.

There are many people who are very religious, and are extremely reverent when they partake of communion, but for them it is more of a tradition, and they are going through the motions. Being religious, and even reverent, however, is not the same thing as believing. In other words, they’re going through the motions without knowing Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord and drawing upon His salvation power for their lives.

What Jesus did when He willingly offered Himself as that sacrifice upon the cross is that He brought physical, emotional, and spiritual healing to those who believe.

And so, when we come to the Table, we receive the strength to live for Jesus, and to acknowledge the healing we received in our relationship with Him.

This is what we might consider as being that which constitutes what Paul said as “discerning the Lord’s body.”

And so, when Jesus said to remember, I don’t think He meant the pain and suffering He endured, because such remembrance brings only continual guilt and shame.

Instead, I believe that Jesus wants us to remember His selfless sacrifice as He went to the cross to die in our place.

I believe He wants us to remember that when we partake of the cup, that it represents the blood He shed, and that it was shed, once and for all, to forgive our sins so we don’t have to live in condemnation any longer. That is why it is the cup of the new covenant.

And when we partake of the bread, we remember what Jesus said about Himself, that He is the bread of life (John 6:35), and that there is spiritual nourishment in and through Him alone that will enable us to live this life to the fullest.

So, let us come to the table this morning, remembering the true reason we celebrate today.