

“Our Great Heritage: Holy Communion”

One week ago, our worship services here at Grace dealt with the sacrament of Holy Baptism. We were reminded in those services that Baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event for a Christian. But it is not something that we forget about later or something with a value that fades away over time. Our Baptism is something that remains valuable for us, something worth thinking about, treasuring, and applying to our lives.

You may quickly notice a difference, then, between last week’s focus on Baptism and this week’s on Holy Communion. Unlike Baptism’s once-in-a-lifetime status, Holy Communion, in accordance with our Savior’s command, is a repeated activity in the life of a Christian. It is a gift that God gives us regularly and frequently. While Baptism marks the beginning of a Christian life, Holy Communion is used throughout.

Now, that is a significant difference between the two. It is one worth pointing out. But in spite of this difference, Holy Baptism and Holy Communion have much in common. That is why we refer to both of them as sacraments. When we use the term sacrament, a term that isn’t used in the Bible, we mean to describe exactly what Baptism and Communion have in common that sets them apart from any other rite or activity. A sacrament is a sacred act which is commanded by God for Christians. It makes use of visible or tangible elements that are used in connection with God’s Word. And finally, a sacrament offers, gives, and seals the forgiveness of sins according to God’s promises.

In our service today we heard one gospel account of Maundy Thursday, when Jesus instituted Holy Communion, also called the Lord’s Supper. The account we read was from Mark’s Gospel, and the event is also recorded in Matthew and Luke. Finally, the Apostle Paul also references that event in the book of 1 Corinthians. While our sermon today will make use of what we learn from those accounts, it is focused primarily on other verses of 1 Corinthians, where Holy Communion is the focus. This brief section from Paul’s epistle tells us a lot about the sacrament and its value.

In fact, these words describe in some of the clearest terms exactly what we receive in Holy Communion. There are the obvious elements, the earthly elements. These are bread and wine. The bread that we most commonly use in worship is formed into small wafers, and our wine is measured out into individual cups. There have been and would be other ways to serve these elements that would be absolutely acceptable. But the real heart of the sacrament is found in what is less obvious, what is not seen except through faith. That is, when we eat the bread and drink the wine, we also receive the body and the blood of Jesus Christ, our Savior. These elements are there by a miracle, and are not obvious to our senses, but they are truly present. Our verses call the bread and the wine a “participation” in the body and the blood. The King James Version translated that word “communion.” The bread is so intimately connected to the body of Christ that when we receive the one, we also receive the other. The wine is so intimately connected with the blood of Christ that when we receive the one, we receive the other.

That is not the teaching about Holy Communion that Luther learned as he grew up. It is not what he was taught when as a priest he began celebrating what was more commonly known as the Mass. Roman Catholic teaching then, as it is now, was that the wine and the bread are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. After the priest said the right words, what was left on the altar was said to be no longer bread or wine, but only Christ’s body and blood. This is called Transubstantiation. Of course, the issue of the elements was not the only concern. What the entire teaching of Transubstantiation also did was turn what Jesus had instituted, a gracious gift from God, into a work that priests and people did. It turned Holy Communion into a sacrifice, something done in order to offer something to God.

This very teaching was one that Luther addressed in many ways as he learned more and more from the Bible. His catechisms addressed this issue in depth. He wrote new orders of service that got rid of all the false teaching of Transubstantiation and taught in its place the teaching of Scripture. Apart from the fact that he wrote them in Latin or in German, those services would seem very familiar to many of us today.

Sadly, however, at the same time that Luther was battling against the false teaching of Transubstantiation, another false teaching was arising. This teaching we call Representationism. See, as a reaction to what was taught by Roman Catholicism, some people were pushing too hard. They said that the body and blood of Christ were never present in the sacrament. Bread remains only bread, and wine remains only wine. It is too difficult to understand how Christ's body could appear in many places all over the world. Bodies just don't do that. And so, instead of simply allowing Scripture to speak, these teachers insisted on a logical and understandable explanation for everything. The bread and the wine simply represent Christ's body and blood, they said.

But you have already heard. Scripture plainly speaks of the bread and the wine as well as Christ's body and blood in the sacrament. There is no need to doubt the words of Jesus when he says, "This is my body" and "This is my blood." Neither is there any need to change his words, "Given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins." We refer to the Bible's teaching in this regard as the Real Presence. Together with the bread and the wine, Christ's body and his blood are really and truly present in the sacrament. And they are there for the forgiveness of sins.

Once again, that is the real heart of the sacrament. It is the real heart of both sacraments: God, completely because of his undeserved love and grace, pours out on people the forgiveness of sins. And these are the means that he uses. And he pours out his grace and love and forgiveness because we need them. Martin Luther writes about Holy Communion and says that if you are not sure whether you need it, the first thing you should do is to pinch yourself. If you find that you have a fleshy body, then you know that you still have a sinful flesh, a sinful nature. So you need forgiveness, and will continue to need it. If that isn't enough, look around you. Are you still in the world? If you are, the world around you will constantly offer temptation. You will need both forgiveness and strengthening. One more thing. This one you won't be able to touch and you won't be able to see. You will have to take the Bible at its word when it says that your enemy the devil prowls around you and seeks to devour you. If you could see him, you would see how scary that is. If you could feel his breath on your neck, you would realize what a vicious enemy he is.

And there, in case you needed them are three excellent reasons to go regularly to the altar and to receive there what God has given you. Together with the obvious, the bread and the wine, comes the true body and blood of Jesus your Savior. The very means that he used to accomplish your salvation he places into your hand and into your mouth. Do you doubt that you are forgiven? Do you doubt that he loves you? Do you doubt that he will take you to live with him in heaven? He says, "My body...my blood...given for you. Take and eat. Take and drink."

And so we do...together. This is one more important aspect of the sacrament of Holy Communion that is mentioned in our verses. Just as the bread and the wine are closely connected to Christ's body and blood for our benefit, so also, we who celebrate the sacrament are connected together in a special way. As one body, we partake together of the one loaf. Granted, this fact is maybe slightly less obvious as we use prepared wafers rather than a single loaf of bread, but the point remains. We celebrate together because we believe together. Each of us comes to the table knowing our sinfulness, desiring forgiveness, and intending to do our best to amend our sinful lives with the strength that God gives. That unity is expressed in our gathering together around the sacrament, and that unity is strengthened by the sacrament as we are all built up in our faith.

This is one of the reasons that we practice member communion as we do here at Grace. It is one reason that we announce it each time before we begin serving. We do not wish to give an expression of unity where there is none. We do not wish to ignore any differences that may separate us. In this very sermon we have already mentioned two major false teachings concerning this sacrament. These are significant. They destroy the unity that we seek and celebrate. They do damage to souls. We will want to share in the clearest possible ways what Scripture teaches and therefore what we believe before we put anyone on the spot to declare and express their unity with us.

But where there is unity, we will celebrate indeed! What a blessing it is to know that from all different walks of life, we have so much in common. We have in common the pains and the difficulties of this life. We have in common the guilt of our sins. We have in common a Savior who sacrificed himself for us. We have in common a confidence in his Word and an appreciation for his gift. This is a communion worth celebrating.

The Text: 1 Corinthians 10:16–17 (NIV84)

¹⁶Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.