

Why Does Communion Matter?
Matthew 26:26–29; Luke 24:13–35
Sunday, October 6, 2024

Let us pray: Open your word to us, Lord, and open our eyes to you, that we could see you and know you as those first disciples did, in Christ. Amen.

Two weeks ago, we talked about why Jesus matters. Last week we had a baptism, so we talked about why *baptism* matters. Today is World Communion Sunday, so guess what we're talking about? Why *communion* matters. And we said last week that baptism is not this magical act that saves us; like one moment God does not love us, but then the water touches our head, and God loves us. Baptism *joins us* to the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago. A lot of people think the same way about communion; that communion is this magical act that saves us.

If you have ever been at a Catholic mass, you might remember that at a certain point the priest is praying, and a bell rings. That bell is supposed to mark the moment of *transubstantiation*, when the bread and the wine *literally* turn into the body and blood of Jesus. And so you can't spill any on the floor, you can't get any crumbs in your beard, and you can't leave any leftover at the end, because that is *literally* Christ's body and blood. You can't just put it in a trash can or pour it down the drain.

As Reformed Christians, Presbyterians think about it a little differently. We say that the bread and the wine (or juice) *remain* bread and juice, but that Christ is *spiritually present with us* as we share this meal. So if that's the case, is it all just *symbolic*? Does anything actually *happen* in communion, or are we just *reenacting* what Jesus did and *imagining* that he's with us? And if

it's all just symbolic, then why bread and juice? Why not pizza and coke? What is it about sharing the bread and the juice that *matters*?

And what I want to say is that while this meal is not *magical*, it is *mystical*. And there's a difference. But we'll come back to that.

Food makes us remember. I would bet that there are certain foods in your life that bring up very specific memories. You eat a certain thing (or even just *smell* it), and it takes you back to a specific time or place or person. Sweet tea. Any time I drink sweet tea, I am immediately transported back to my grandmother's kitchen. Or the strawberry cake that my other grandmother made for me every year on my birthday. If I see or smell or taste strawberry cake, I am back at my grandparents' house on my birthday. Seafood, especially fried fish, is *home* for me. I know that for Jen it is chicken patties and mashed potatoes with gravy. If she is ever having a bad day, I make that for dinner, and that is a comfort food that takes her back to her college dining hall and makes everything okay. Food helps us remember.

And that is the case with communion. Nancy read the story of Jesus, just before he died, eating the Passover meal with his disciples. He takes bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it to them, and he says, "Do this to remember me." A few days later, everything has fallen apart. Jesus has been crucified and buried, his messianic movement is over, and his disciples are going back to their lives. Two of his followers are walking from Jerusalem to a village called Emmaus, presumably going back home. A stranger starts walking with them and talking with them. They don't know that it's the resurrected Christ. Until they all sit down to eat at the end of the night, and this stranger takes bread and blesses it and breaks it and gives it to them. And they

remember the way that Jesus had done that same thing just a few days earlier. Their eyes are opened, and they recognize him.

Communion helps us remember Jesus' saving death. The bread reminds us of his body, broken for us on the cross. The wine or juice reminds us of his blood, shed for us on the cross. And we *remember* the love that God has for us. Love and forgiveness that is not based on anything that *we* have done or how good *we* are. Rather, it is all about what *God* has done in Christ and how good *God* is. This meal is a taste of grace that is supposed to help us remember that we are loved and forgiven and claimed by God. When we see and smell and taste communion, that is what it should remind us of. It should take us back to the cross and the salvation that was made possible there.

So that's the first reason that communion matters. It reminds us of Christ's saving death; that we are loved and forgiven by God. And we *need* that reminder, *at least* once a month, but probably more. That no matter how many mistakes we make, how badly we mess up, when we hurt people or are hurt by them, there is still (there is *always*) a place at the table for us with Jesus. This meal helps us remember that.

Another reason that communion matters is because it nurtures our faith. *Baptism* marks the beginning of a new life, our birth into a life of faith. What is one of the main things that a baby needs after it is born? Food. You need food in order to live and grow and get stronger. And just like food nourishes our bodies, this meal nourishes our spirits, our souls, our faith. But when we say it nourishes our *faith*, we don't just mean what we *believe*. The Greek word for *faith* that is used in the New Testament is not just about intellectually agreeing with *ideas* about God. It

means something closer to *trust*. Faith is not just about *believing* in God. It is about living in ways that *trust* God. And communion nurtures our ability to do that. How?

Again, by *remembering*. Communion is connected to the Jewish feast of Passover. When the people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, God unleashed a series of plagues on the Egyptians, the last of which was the death of all the firstborn Egyptian children. But God told the Israelites to eat a specific meal that night and to paint blood on the doorframes of their houses, so that the Spirit of God would *pass over* their houses and not harm their children. And it was through this that God set the people of Israel free from slavery.

After they had been set free, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. There wasn't enough food for them to eat out in the wilderness, so God provided manna (bread from heaven) for them to eat. This bread that God provided is what kept them alive for 40 years.

There were times when Jesus was out in the wilderness with huge crowds of people, and they were hungry, but there wasn't enough food for all of them. So Jesus took a few loaves of bread and turned it into enough to feed thousands of people.

Jesus' first miracle in John's gospel was at a wedding, where they had run out of wine. So Jesus takes these big containers of water and turns them into wine.

All of these stories remind us that *God provides for our needs*. There are times when we are faced with impossibly difficult situations, and we think, "How in the world are we ever going to make it through this?" A medical diagnosis. The loss of someone we love. The end of a relationship. We're looking at the financials, and the numbers just aren't working out. You or

someone you love is struggling with an addiction or mental illness. Situations that are often beyond our means and ability to change. If we *could*, we *would*, but sometimes we just *can't*. In those times, we are invited to trust that God provides exactly what we need to live. Not always what we *want* or as much as we *think* we need, but *what* we need, *when* we need it. That is what faith is – trusting that God provides for our lives and then living in ways that *show* that trust.

This meal *helps* us to trust because it reminds us of the times that God has provided for God's people before, and that God will do it again for us. God will set us free from that which holds us captive. God will make a way where there is no way. God will provide where there is not enough. God will bring about *life* where there is *death*. God can take the bad things in our lives and the pain that we experience and turn it into the very thing that saves us.

Communion *matters* because it reminds us that God provides for our needs. So when *you* eat this meal today, let it remind *you* of the ways that God has provided in the past, so you can *trust* that God will do it for you in whatever situation you are facing.

There are a lot of reasons that communion matters, but the last one we're going to talk about today is that communion matters because it connects us to God and to each other. First, it connects us to God. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life, the bread that has come down from heaven. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I abide in them." Later, Jesus says, "I am the vine, and you are the branches that grow off of the vine. Abide in me, as I abide in you." This is one of the reasons that we use bread and wine or juice and not anything else in communion. Jesus is the bread of life, so we eat bread. Jesus is the vine, so we drink the fruit of the vine, whether it is wine or grape juice. And like we talked about earlier, there is this

whole long history of meals and miracles throughout scripture where God uses bread and wine. So it connects us to all of that.

The bread is Christ's body, broken for us. When we *eat* it, Christ's body becomes a part of *our* bodies. Christ *abides* in us, spiritually. The juice is Christ's blood, shed for us. When we *drink* it, Christ's blood flows through *our* bodies, giving us life, and Christ abides in us.

Those of you who have come to our Maundy Thursday service during Holy Week know that we do communion a little differently there. The table is down at the foot of the steps, and we come up in groups of 6–8, and we all stand right around the table and pass the bread and the cup to each other. We gather around the table, just like Jesus did with his disciples on that night 2,000 years ago. And it *feels* different. It *feels* like we are at the table with Jesus.

That is how communion is *always* supposed to feel. Even though we don't always gather around the table like that, it is always supposed to have this feeling of, "I am with Christ, and Christ is with me." When we come to Christ's table and eat Christ's body and drink Christ's blood, we are connected to God.

We are also connected to each other. When we share communion, we are all engaged in the same act at the same time, eating of the same bread, drinking from the same cup. And we may be doing that with people we don't *know*, with people we don't always *like* or get along with. But when we share this meal, we are made *one* in Christ. And just like when the risen Christ took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to his disciples, and their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, when *we* share this meal, *our* eyes should be opened to recognize the

face of Jesus in each other. In this meal, strangers become family, and we all become the body of Christ.

We talk about the bread as the body of Christ, but we also talk about the *church* as the body of Christ. We are the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the world today. Like the 16th century Spanish mystic Teresa of Avila said, “Christ has no body but yours; no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.”

When we *eat* Christ’s body, we *become* Christ’s body, made one with each other. And not just each other, but with Christians all over the world. We are especially mindful of that today, as we share this meal with brothers and sisters in California and Cameroon and Cambodia, in Venezuela and Venice, in Sidney and Siberia, in Hungary and Haiti. We are all eating this meal *together* today. And not just *today*, but when we eat this meal we are connected with Christ’s faithful people who have eaten this meal over the past 2,000 years. We are connected with Peter and Paul, with Teresa of Avila and Mother Teresa, with Martin Luther and Martin Luther King, Jr. You are connected to my grandparents. I am connected to your parents. We are *all* connected to each other in Christ.

I cannot tell you exactly how that works. It is a holy mystery. I mentioned at the beginning that this meal is not *magical*, but it is *mystical*. And I referred just a moment ago to the 16th century Spanish *mystic* Teresa of Avila. A *mystic* is someone who has a direct experience of God, an encounter with God, and their life and faith flows from that encounter. In this meal, we encounter the risen Christ. We *experience* God’s grace. We smell and touch and taste God.

And like Jesus' disciples on the road to Emmaus, Christ is *made known* to us in the breaking of the bread, and our hearts burn within us.

You want to *know God*? Share this meal. You want to *experience God*? Share this meal. Because in this meal, we are reminded of God's great love for us in Christ's saving death. In this meal we are reminded that God provides for us, and we are nurtured in our ability to live in ways that trust God. In this meal we are *connected* to God and to each other. *Share* this meal so that we can then go out and *be* this meal, broken and poured out for others, for the world, as Christ was for us. Amen.