

Sermon – June 6, 2021
“The New Covenant”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Luke 22:7-20

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

In our journey with Jesus, we have moved through Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. We have traveled far and learned exciting things, such as Jesus is now seated in heaven at the right hand of God and we too are seated with him when we believe in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit. As those who follow Jesus, we are connected to Jesus and seated in heaven with him and therefore have access to his power and authority. If we keep this connection in our thoughts, how we understand being a disciple will continue to change as we are conformed to the image of Christ.

This morning's scripture reading is the account of the Last Supper in Luke's Gospel. Let's place this event into its context. The setting is the Passover celebration, the feast that is celebrated each year by Jews, a time when they remember what God has done and is doing for them. The Passover meal would be celebrated as a family unit with the head of the family, the oldest male, leading the service. In Luke's Gospel, we see Jesus in this role as the leader of those gathered. If you don't recall, the Passover meal progresses through four steps. First, a cup of wine is poured, blessed, and shared. It is followed by bitter herbs dipped in a sauce. Next, the second cup is readied and the youngest son asks questions about the meal: "Why is this night

different from all other nights? Why is only unleavened bread eaten on this night?" and so forth. Following the asking of these questions, the head of the family tells those gathered the story of the Exodus from Egypt. He also reads the account of what God did for Israel from Deuteronomy. After this reading, the second cup of wine is shared. Next, the leader of the family takes unleavened bread, says a blessing over it, breaks it, and passes pieces to all present. Those gathered then share in the meal of the Passover lamb. After the meal is complete there are two more cups of wine, each followed by the singing of psalms. The meal brings into focus the meaning of the Passover, helping those present to remember what God is doing. The meal establishes and renews in the present time a connection to the past, present, and future. This is the expectation of those gathered with Jesus this evening. However, during the Last Supper celebration of Passover, Jesus changes the familiar service. Another context point is to realize who is present with Jesus. Luke tells us that the apostles are present. It is rare for Luke to use this name for those who follow Jesus and so we need to catch this change. Jesus is gathered with his followers, those who will be sent out into the world to be a blessing to all people. The Lord's Supper then is not a place just for family members but a table for those who are followers of Jesus who will be sent out into the world to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

Jesus takes a cup of wine, gives thanks, and tells those present to divide the cup among themselves as he will not drink from the fruit of the vine again until the kingdom of God comes. That Jesus says he will drink of the fruit of the vine again points to the resurrection. His words that he will drink of the fruit of the vine again when the kingdom of God comes points to a future time when he will again feast with those who are sent to the nations. Jesus begins to point to something new in the midst of this historic meal.

Jesus also takes one of the unleavened pieces of bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and gives it to those at the table telling them, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." The focus of this action is not on the breaking of the bread, but on the giving of the bread. When Jesus gives this bread, he changes the Passover meal into something new. The bread is a symbol of Jesus' body broken for his community, and the meal becomes a memorial act, a time to remember and to share with others Jesus' death. The Passover was the center of life for the Jewish people. This meal was something they did every year together to recall and solidify the Exodus, when God set them free. The event helped unify them as a nation and grounded them again in what it means to be a people of God in the past, now and in the

future. This is the Hebrew concept of zikron, where the physical is used to help something cling to one's memory. The changes Jesus brings to the Last Supper are something new, a new beginning, a new revelation, Passover becomes the Lord's Supper, a meal with new meaning. The meal becomes a time to remember when God acted to free God's people from sin and death. The thanks given for this bread is also thanks for the sacrifice that will allow a path to be opened for a new relationship with God.

Next, Jesus takes one of the cups of wine and calls it the blood of the new covenant. This is the new covenant where the Law is not written on tablets of stone and placed in the temple of one's God to be read at some interval. This covenant is to be written on the hearts of those who believe in Jesus. Such followers of Jesus are not left to struggle with obedience to the Law but are empowered to be transformed by the Holy Spirit into followers of Jesus who are enabled to live in a manner that honors God and to be remade into Jesus' image. The new covenant also points to God's plan for his steadfast love to be given to his people, those who enter into this new covenant. The mention of blood points to violent suffering, Jesus' death. The covenant aspect points beyond a violent death and the shedding of blood to life again in the kingdom of God, a place of lasting future interaction.

Now, with Jesus' teaching, we have a meal with new meaning for bread and a cup of wine. We have a sacrament. What is a sacrament? In the Methodist understanding, a sacrament is "an outward sign of inward grace, and a means whereby we receive the same." A sacrament combines words, actions, and physical elements: bread, wine, a table, words, memories, thoughts, and the Spirit, into sign-acts which both express and convey God's grace and love. Baptism and Communion, or the Lord's Supper, are sacraments that were instituted or commanded by Jesus in the Gospels. In this morning's scripture, we have been witnesses to the institution of the sacrament of Communion. We will look at Baptism another time, today, let us look deeper into the meaning of Communion.

To begin to grasp the idea of how a sacrament can convey God's grace and love, we need to have a definition of grace. And since we are Methodists, we should be familiar with the Methodist's understanding of grace and how Methodists describe grace. Methodists believe that we are sinners and as sinners we are constantly in need of divine grace. We also believe that God is gracious and is extending steadfast love as the grace we need. Grace is God's love toward us; it is God's free and undeserved, unmerited gift. Methodists have several words to describe

grace. The first is prevenient grace. This is the grace that comes before we are able to do anything to help ourselves. As sinners, without God's help, we cannot turn to him. We need grace to have the freedom of will to respond to God. We as sinners cannot move toward God unless God has first moved toward us. Next, Methodists describe grace as convicting grace. This is the grace that helps us realize we are sinners and our lives are sinful. Convicting grace gives us an inward prompting or desire to repent. As we come to repentance, turn to Jesus, and believe in him, we are extended justifying grace. This is grace that brings forgiveness, bringing us into a right relationship with God. These next two aspects of the Methodist understanding of grace speak to different aspects of this new relationship with God. Sanctifying grace is the grace that enables us to grow into holiness of life. We are enabled to be transformed into those whose lives honor God. The other is perfecting grace. Perfecting grace molds us, remakes us, and transforms us into the image of Jesus. These descriptions of grace are the Methodist understanding of the progression of God's grace working with our free will to move us from being a lost sinner estranged from God to a forgiven sinner in right relationship with God. God's grace is given to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Grace works in our lives through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The loaf of bread and cup of wine are the means through which we experience grace. They are the *zikhron* in our communion with Jesus that locks grace into our memories.

If this all seems a bit mysterious to us, let me share that in the early church there was in use a Greek word, *mysterion*, usually translated as mystery. This word was used to convey the idea that through a sacrament, God discloses things beyond human capacity to know through the use of reason alone. As we partake of the sacrament of Communion, we enter into a place and time where what is shared with us goes beyond what we can reason out of our human understanding, and we are given insight into the things of God.

There are aspects of Communion that we can grasp that are not hidden in mystery. In fact, in the New Testament there are six aspects of Communion that we can and should understand as being present when we come to Jesus' table. They are thanksgiving, fellowship, remembrance, sacrifice, action of the Holy Spirit, and eschatology. Let's look at the first three this morning.

Thanksgiving is the first aspect. Communion is an act of thanksgiving. When we partake of Communion, we are giving thanks for all of God's mighty acts through history: creation,

covenant, redemption, and sanctification. The end point of our thanksgiving is the work of Jesus Christ and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit. In the service of Communion, we give thanks for a good God and God's unconditional love for us.

Holy Communion is also the gathering of a community of faithful, not only those we gather with in this place, but the community that also is communing throughout the world. Hear the words of 1 Corinthians 10:17 that are found in the service, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." The bonding we experience at the table with Jesus is the nature of the church and the model of how God's people are to be represented in the world. We are to be a body, the church united in Christ.

The next aspect is remembrance. On many Communion tables, we will find Jesus' words engraved, "Do this in remembrance of me." We heard these words read in this morning's reading from Luke. We want to approach these words with caution that we don't fall into simply remembering what Jesus has done in the past. Remembrance is a recalling of the past gracious acts of God in the power of the Holy Spirit in a manner that allows us to become present in them now. Christ is risen and is alive now. In Communion we experience the risen Lord as we come to his table and join with him in table fellowship. This is not a remembering of what has occurred in the past, but what is ongoing in the now of our lives.

I hope that the next time we think about Communion we will do more than remember the past and instead remember these aspects of Communion as we approach the Lord's Table. Don't worry if this all seems overly complex or too much to recall. Just approach Jesus' table as those of the early church did, with the expectation of meeting Jesus in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the wine. As we prepare to come to Jesus' table and have communion with him, let us remember there is far more to Communion than recalling a past act of God, and as we come, let the Holy Spirit lead us into all truth as we seek communion at Jesus' table. Let me close with a prayer and then let us move into Holy Communion.

Pray with me: Lord, come and meet us at this table with all of the saints who we once communed with in this place. Lord, be present with us and give to us the grace that comes with our experience of the physical bread and juice of the vine. Lord, pour out your Holy Spirit in this place that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. Amen