

Sermon – August 1, 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 labor in love in your harvest on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

Some of us may recall that we have heard this morning's scripture recently read. If you are among that group, you are correct. Two months ago, we looked at this passage in Luke and began to seek insights into the mystery of Holy Communion. We may also recall that sermon addressed the first three aspects of Communion: thanksgiving, fellowship, and remembrance. This morning I will focus on the last three: sacrifice, action of the Holy Spirit, and eschatology

First, let me remind us of the context of this morning's scripture. The setting is the Passover celebration, the feast that is celebrated each year by Jews, a time when they remember what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do in their lives. Passover is a time when they remember the mighty acts of God done through Moses to free them from cruel bondage in Egypt. This is an event we are working towards in the Exodus sermon series and hopefully our own reading of Exodus. A normal Passover meal would be celebrated as a family and would move 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. The oldest male in the family takes unleavened bread, blesses 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 singing of psalms. The meal brings into the now a focus on the meaning of the Passover, helping those present to remember what God has done in the past, is doing now, and will accomplish in the future. Passover establishes and renews in the present time a connection to the past, present, and future. Such was the expectation of those gathered with Jesus. However, during the Last Supper celebration of Passover, Jesus changed the familiar service.

Jesus first takes one of the cups of wine during the meal, 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, "I 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 becomes 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 on our behalf. The changes Jesus gives during the Last Supper mark something new, a new beginning, a new revelation. The 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, not from cruel bondage in Egypt, but from our bondage to sin and death. Giving thanks for this bread becomes giving 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, a covenant where the conditions are 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 by recreating them 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. Yet, the covenantal 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 the sacraments 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. Months ago, we began to look deeper into the meaning of Communion and this morning we will continue that look.

To begin to grasp the idea of how a sacrament can convey God's grace and love, we need a definition of 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 His steadfast love as the grace we need. Grace is God's love toward us. It is God's free, undeserved, unmerited gift. 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 physical means through which we are able to connect more readily to God's grace. The bread and juice can be touched, felt, smelled, and seen, and can open our minds to God's grace. 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.

In the New Testament, there are six primary 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. The last time we were in the upper room with Jesus, we learned more about thanksgiving, fellowship, and remembrance. Let me remind us briefly what they mean.

In the service of Communion, we give thanks for God's unconditional love for us seen in Jesus' work on our behalf. The fellowship we experience at Jesus' Table is the nature of the church and the model of how God's people are to be represented in the world. As this body gathers for Communion, we enter into a time of remembrance. Remembrance is a recalling of the past gracious acts of God in the power of the Holy Spirit, allowing us to be present in them now. Christ is risen and is alive; 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.

Now having reviewed the first three aspects of Communion, let's look in a little more detail at the last three. The next aspect of Communion is sacrifice. The bread and the cup are a presentation of the sacrifice of Christ. In Hebrews 9:26, we learn that Jesus "has appeared once for all at the end of the age to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself." Grace is made available to us through Christ's atoning life, death, and resurrection. In Communion, we also present ourselves as a sacrifice in union with Christ, offering ourselves to be used by God in the work of redemption, reconciliation, and justice. We will hear the words in the Communion service, "We offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us." In this manner, Holy Communion brings us into the sacrifice of Christ as the body of Christ in the places we are sent. In the mystery of Communion, we connect through the Holy Spirit to Christ and his sacrifice for us, reconciling us to God. Our connection to Jesus' sacrifice leads us to actions that are outward, into the world, extending God's grace to others, and seeking to help them be reconciled to God. We don't come to Communion to receive the elements and go about our lives. We come and receive new strength to go and live sacrificial lives as the body of Christ working in his ripe harvest.

The next aspect of Holy Communion is its function as a channel of action for the Holy Spirit. For me, one of the great moments in the Holy Communion service is when we ask the Holy Spirit to come and act. The words we hear are "Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine." The church asks God to "make the bread and grape juice be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood." The words continue with "By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world . . ." We invite or call for the Holy Spirit to come and act to connect us to Christ, for Christ to be present in the meal with us. We ask through

the Spirit for us to be one with Christ, in union with each other and those who become ready, willing and empowered to go out into ministry into the world. The Holy Spirit is acting in the midst of the Communion service to connect us to Jesus who is seated at the right hand of God, the place of all power and authority. And then through the Holy Spirit, we are sent out from Communion into ministry to all of the world. We are sent to those who do not yet know Jesus as their Savior to share the Good News we have been given by speaking Jesus' words and sharing his actions.

Finally, and I know we have been waiting for that word, Holy Communion is eschatological. If you call up someone and tell them your pastor preached about eschatological things this morning, they will probably give you their condolences. Eschatological is a theological word for things that have to do with the end of history, the culmination of God's purpose for the world. Communion also points us to the end of time and the fulfillment of God's plan. We say together each time we commune these words, "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." I hope we remember saying those words, but do we think about what they mean? They mean that we not only commune with those who come to the altar, but with the saints of the past who join with us in this sacrament. All of those who once communed in this place who have gone on to be with Christ are connected to us as we commune. Remember the words that Jesus shared as he gave us the Lord's Supper? He told the apostles gathered with him, "I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." When we feast at Jesus' Table, we not only partake of the divine nature now in this place, but partake in the eternal life that is now and not yet. We look forward with all of the saints to the time when we will celebrate together at the heavenly banquet God's final victory over sin and death in the brokenness of our lives as we are nourished by the grace that comes with this sacrament and we are opened to a yearning for eternal fellowship with Christ. As we commune, we are filled with grace and formed or reformed into instruments that Christ uses for the transformation of ourselves and of this present world.

As we commune this morning, we should do more than remember the past and instead remember these aspects of Communion as we feast at 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, expecting to meet Jesus in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the juice of the fruit of the vine. As we prepare to come to Jesus' Table and commune with him, let us remember

there is far more to Communion than recalling a past act of God. As we come, let the Holy Spirit lead us into all truth. Let me close with a prayer and then we will move into Holy Communion.

Pray with me: Lord, come and meet us at this table with all of the saints with whom we once communed in this place. Lord, be present with us and gift us with 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