

The Lord's Supper: Presbyterian Style

World Communion Sunday

*Matthew 26:17-19, 26-30 1 Corinthians 11:23-2 Rev. Todd B. Freeman
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa October 5, 2008*

Today, across the entire world, Christian churches are celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (also known as Communion, and the Eucharist) in recognition of our oneness and unity in Jesus Christ. This is an especially important message in our day and age of increasing divisiveness and polarization. As I reflect upon whom it seems to be we are most divided and polarized with, I often think that it's with other Christians.

Interestingly, however, it is this very sacrament that has led to a lot of historical division within the church. So on this **World Communion Sunday** I thought it would be appropriate to speak on our various understandings of the Lord's Supper.

So I'd like to start by taking a little survey. I'm interested, and I think you will be too, in knowing which particular faith tradition each of us grew up in, if any at all. Raise your hand, if you would please (and you can do this more than once if necessary), if you grew up primarily as a Presbyterian church; Methodist; Lutheran; Episcopal; Baptist; Pentecostal/non-denominational Evangelical; Roman Catholic; something else?

Think for a moment just how many different religious teachings we all together have grown up with. I would further venture to say that there are as many different understandings of the meaning of communion as there are people in this sanctuary.

When I was growing up in the Midwest, the Presbyterian church I belonged to followed the tradition of serving communion only four times a year. This was very common back in the 1960's and 70s. If you happened to miss one of those Sundays, then it was an entire half a year before you had communion again.

It was the custom of the Presbyterian denomination at that time to serve communion only to those old enough to have gone through Confirmation Class. In my case, I was 14 years old and in the 9th grade before my first communion. I still remember that occasion very well. It was a significant and meaningful event in my life. I'm sure many of you remember your very first communion as well.

The Presbyterian Church today, however, has changed many of these traditional practices. A majority of congregations, for instance, celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper once a month. And I know some of you, especially those from a Catholic background, grew up taking the Eucharist every week.

Also, the Presbyterian Church now allows children to share in this sacrament. This change came about, in part, to **emphasize God's grace in this event more than our knowledge and understanding of this event.**

So the place where we should probably start this morning is with the following question: **What is your understanding of communion? What does it mean to you when you participate in this sacrament of sharing the bread and the cup?**

Perhaps you're not exactly sure what it means, you just know it's something important. Most likely, the majority of us are in this category: feeling that we don't have the meaning of the Lord's Supper all figured out. If that's the case for you, then you're in very good company. For our own John Calvin, the person to whom we Presbyterians trace our roots, back to the Protestant Reformation in 16th century Geneva, Switzerland, wasn't too sure either. Next year, by the way, will be the 500th anniversary of Calvin's birth.

In one of my favorite quotes from **John Calvin**, he wrote the following concerning the Lord's Supper, "**It is a mystery too sublime for me to be able to express, or even to comprehend; and, to be still more explicit, I rather experience it, than understand it.**"

John Calvin was a great thinker, and a very logical and rational theologian. Yet he was honest enough with himself to admit that when it comes to the grace and ways of God, there are some things he just had to realize are still a mystery. **To this day, I think we should be caution of anyone who thinks they have God all figured out – and that applies to folks from all ends of the theological spectrum.**

That being said, Presbyterians, like other denominations, have tried to put into words our own unique understanding of The Lord's Supper. **While I do not believe it is my role as the pastor of this church to tell you what you should believe (like that would happen...) it is my role to at least inform you of things Presbyterian.**

Most things Presbyterian are discussed in what is called the *Book of Order*. It is a part of our church's constitution, along with our *Book of Confessions*. The *Book of Order* is divided up into three sections, the first being our Form of Government, the last being our Rules of Discipline. The middle section is called the Directory for Worship, and it explains how and why we Presbyterians worship the way we do.

For one thing, you may not know that we Presbyterian pastors cannot serve communion any time we please. It is the responsibility of the Elders on the Session of the church to give approval for the times and places that communion will be served, including at special times like at retreats or in the homes of those

who are shut in, or in the hospital. And except for sharing it with the homebound and sick, communion can only be served at a public service of worship where everyone is invited.

For instance, if a couple is getting married, the bride and groom cannot be given communion only by themselves. **Everyone must be invited to participate in this sacrament whenever it is served. It is for the entire community of faith, the whole church. It is not a private ceremony or a devotional exercise.** The same is true, by the way, with our other sacrament, Baptism. It must be done in public worship, not just with the family, and also must have the approval of the session beforehand.

Concerning our approach of offering communion, we Presbyterians have what is called "**open communion**" where **everyone, not just Presbyterians, are welcome to the table**. This differs from a "closed communion" where, in the Catholic Church for example, only other Catholics are invited to partake.

Our *Book of Order* states, "The invitation to the Lord's Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love." It goes on to state something very important, "**Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus.**" That most likely includes each one of us at one point or another in our lives.

Whenever communion is served it must be preceded by the reading and proclaiming of the Word. That is, reading the Bible and preaching. Herein lies one of the biggest differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics.

The focal point of a Catholic Mass is the Eucharist, communion. Back in the Middle Ages, they believed that the *only* way to receive God's grace was through communion. This belief, unfortunately, led to many abuses where priests would deny access to the sacrament, even to the extreme of permanent excommunication from the church, for those who didn't believe or behave the way they wanted them too. Being cut off from God's grace, in their understanding, would condemn that person to hell.

The Protestant reformers, including Presbyterians, did not believe that. **Then and now, we believe that God's grace, while certainly present in this sacrament, can come to any person at any time and at any place of God's choosing. It is not up to me or anyone else to decide whom and how God will bless!**

So one of the primary purposes of the Protestant Reformation was to shift the focal point of worship from the sacrament to the reading of the Bible and its interpretation in the sermon. In fact, that's why Protestants were historically called "people of the Word." **Teaching directly from the Bible replaced the primary teaching of just church doctrine and church tradition.**

When it comes to the significance of the actual bread and wine (or grape juice), Presbyterians really differ from Catholics, and even from Martin Luther, the first great Protestant reformer. In fact, it was primarily over this difference of

understanding that led John Calvin to split from the Martin Luther. In other words, without this conflict over the meaning of the elements in the Lord's Supper, we'd all probably be Lutherans today.

The historical Roman Catholic Church taught something called "transubstantiation." During communion, they believed that the substance of the bread itself actually transformed somehow to the real substance of the body of Jesus Christ; the wine to the real substance of the blood of Christ – though neither one actually changed in appearance, odor, or taste.

John Calvin understood the elements in a much different way. He taught, as we teach today, that **Jesus Christ is present during communion, but spiritually, not in substance**. So if anyone asks you about what Presbyterians believe about this issue of the bread and wine, the simple answer is: Presbyterians believe in the real spiritual presence of Christ when we partake of the bread and cup.

So as we share in communion later this morning, **think about what it means to you to have the very real spiritual presence of Christ among us, and within you.**

The bread and the wine remain just that, common bread and wine. Nothing magical happens to them. In the same manner, nothing magical happens to the water during baptism either. Instead, they act as visible signs and symbols. And **as symbols they point beyond themselves to a deeper reality. That reality, and this is the most important part, involves the promises that God has made to us in this new covenant – this new relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ.**

The bread and the cup outwardly represent those things that God is doing for us inwardly. One of the most important things God is doing for us is **feeding you and me spiritually**. Just as food provides nourishment for our hungry bodies, the Lord's Supper promises spiritual nourishment for our hungry souls.

But perhaps the greatest mystery in this sacrament is that it somehow – somehow – unites us with Christ and each other, reminding us that Christ, the Spirit of God, dwells within each one of us. **The promise in the Lord's Supper is that we are all connected**, to everyone in every part of the world, regardless of our denominational and personal theological beliefs. Think what implications that has for your life

That is what we are celebrating today, our oneness with brothers and sisters, hermanos y hermanas, across the globe. **So, even if we can't completely understand intellectually what The Lord's Supper is all about, hopefully we will experience it – experience God's empowering and uniting presence with us, and within us.**

Amen.