

God's Gift of the Eucharist

A Sermon preached by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey
The Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA
Maundy Thursday, March 24, 2016
Luke 22:14-30, 1 Corinthians 11:23-32 (Exodus 12:1-14a)

Luke 22:14-30 (NRSV): When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!" Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this. A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. "You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

1 Corinthians 11:23-32 (NRSV): For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Tonight is Maundy Thursday. That's not "Monday Thursday," but *Maundy* Thursday. The word "Maundy" comes from the Latin *mandatum*, or mandate. The mandate of Maundy Thursday is Jesus' mandate to us to 'do this in remembrance of him.' On this Maundy Thursday, we hear from the Gospel According to Luke and remember in particular the institution of the Eucharist, where Jesus took bread and wine and said 'this is my body, this is my blood, do this in remembrance of me.'

The Eucharist is the central feast of the church. But why is that so? Some Christians celebrate the Eucharist rarely. In the reformed tradition of Christianity, the focus of weekly worship is the proclamation of the Word of God. Indeed, the Eucharist needs the readings of scripture to truly be the Eucharist. But does the proclamation of the Word of God truly need the Eucharist? For most of Christianity, the answer is yes.

Not that every worship service needs to have communion, but we believe that the Eucharist is crucial to the church's proclamation. As Paul writes in tonight's New Testament reading, "for as

often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The Eucharist is central to proclaiming the true Word of God: Jesus himself, crucified and risen.

In the Eucharist, we are united with Jesus in thanksgiving to God, united to Jesus' sacrifice for our sins, and united with him in his resurrection. The feast of the Eucharist gathers into one moment all the drama of the great three days: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Great Vigil of Easter. The Eucharist brings us into the presence of the crucified and risen Lord.

First of all, the Eucharist is an offering of thanksgiving. The word Eucharist means thanksgiving. Jesus takes bread and wine and offers them to God. We are so used to this in church, but this was a basic part of life at home for Jesus and his Jewish followers. I remember going to a friend's house for dinner one Friday. They were a Jewish family, and this was their Sabbath dinner. The father of the family took bread and lifted it up and said "Blessed are you, O LORD our God, king of the universe, bringing forth bread from the earth." He broke the bread and passed it around for us to share. Then he took a cup of wine and lifted it up and said "Blessed are you, O LORD our God, king of the universe, creating the fruit of the vine." And he passed the wine around for us to share.

I said to myself, "hey—I've seen that before!" Then I thought how foolish of me not to know how natural this was for Jesus to do with his disciples, and it occurred to me how sad that I was unaware of Christianity's Jewish roots. The offering of bread and wine to God is a thanksgiving to God for providing our food and drink, and an acknowledgement of his sovereignty over all creation. These actions also call to mind a grain offering and a wine offering. Such offerings were thanksgivings to God that accompanied sacrifices for sin. The wine offering was poured out on the altar, giving up the wine itself as an act of giving to God. Jesus recalls this wine offering when he says "this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." Jesus' blood was poured out for us—shed for us.

In the Eucharist, we offer thanks to God, and God unites us to the gift and outpouring of Jesus for us. He is an offering to God, and a sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins.

This week in Jesus' life was also the week of the Passover holiday. We heard from Exodus the instructions for the keeping of the Passover meal. The Passover meal is a remembrance of God's salvation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. The angel of death was coming for God's enemies, and the blood of the Passover lamb marked the doors of the Hebrews to save them from death. Some interpreters suggest that the Passover lamb would have been slaughtered at just the time Jesus was being crucified. The word for Easter in most languages is "Pascha," from the Hebrew word "pesach," the word we translate "Passover." Our sacred meal of the Eucharist is the Christian Passover—the remembrance of Jesus' death as a Passover lamb who saves us from death. Jesus is the "lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world." And so we say "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast." The Eucharist is an offering of thanksgiving for Jesus' sacrifice for sins, and for his death that brings us life. We are united with Jesus in his death and resurrection.

Because Jesus is alive, we are alive in him. The Eucharist is not merely a reenactment of the last supper. We are not like civil war re-enactors playing dress-up. We truly believe that the sacrament of the Eucharist brings us into the presence of God. Jesus takes the offering of bread and wine and invests them with new meaning: "This is my body," he says, "This is my blood."

The church, from its earliest days has seen the Eucharist as more than a simple meal. In the Eucharist, we have “Holy Communion.” We are in communion with Christ and his church. We are united with Jesus in his offering for us, his sacrifice for our sins, and his rising to life again.

In the protestant reformation, there were many arguments about exactly how we describe the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Roman Catholics used Aristotelian physics to try to describe how Christ is present, leading to the doctrine of transubstantiation. Anglican Christians are usually reluctant to define the sacred mystery in such detail. Anglicans often emphasize how the elements of Communion are *both* bread and wine *and* the body and blood of Christ. Just as Jesus is both human and divine, so the elements are both bread and wine, and the risen Lord present with us. We call this the doctrine of the Real Presence. As we eat and drink this sacred meal, we are united with Jesus in his offering for us, his sacrifice for our sins, and his rising to life again.

For centuries, the church has recognized the presence of Christ in this sacred feast. And if we are united with Christ, who is truly present, then we are united with each other through him. We are “in communion” with Christ and his church. We are in communion with Christians around the world, and Christians throughout time. This is the “communion of saints” that we confess in the apostles’ creed.

When you come forward for communion tonight, I want you to look at the new panes of stained glass in the New Testament window. At the base, we see the Last Supper, with Jesus at the center, flanked by his twelve apostles, including Judas. Above it, we see the scene of Palm Sunday: Jesus entering Jerusalem surrounded by celebration. Above that, we see the symbol of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. The next open panes are for Mark, Luke and John. And below, the open panes are for Jesus’ Baptism, his crucifixion, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus’ resurrection is shown in the window above the organ pipes.

The Eucharist unites the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This table is set at the crossing of the Old Testament windows, the New Testament windows, the Nativity window and the Resurrection window.

When you come forward for communion tonight, open yourself to the presence of Jesus, join with him in his life, death and resurrection. Feel that communion with him in this holy sacrament. Enter this feast knowing that you share this table with the holy apostles and martyrs, and with Christians throughout history. Share this holy food and drink knowing that you share it with Christians in Syria and Sudan, in China and Belgium, in Mexico and Australia, and even those down the street from us.

Tonight, we enter into the drama of Holy Week. We gather with all these disciples of Jesus near and far to sit at the table with Jesus. We walk with him to Gethsemane. We watch in fear as he is arrested and taken away. Tomorrow, we walk with him to his trial, torture and crucifixion. And at the Great Vigil, we go to the tomb and find it empty, and our Lord risen. We light the new fire and celebrate Christ’s victory over sin and death.

In the future, as you come to receive communion, remember the drama of these great three days, summed up in our weekly celebration of the Eucharist. Unite yourself with Christ in this sacrament, that in his thanksgiving and sacrifice and resurrection, you may know the joys of new life in him!