

## **Sermon for Zion, May 27, 2018 – Anniversary, Trinity and Communion Sunday**

**Hymns:** Hymns: 299 – Holy, Holy, Holy; Praise God / All People That on Earth;  
526 – Lift Up Your Hearts Unto The Lord; 685 – How Firm A Foundation

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 - The Message

**Sermon Title:** More Than A Ritual – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

### ***1 Corinthians 11:23-26 - The Message***

*Let me go over with you again exactly what goes on in the Lord's Supper and why it is so centrally important. I received my instructions from the Master himself and passed them on to you. The Master, Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, broken for you. Do this to remember me."*

*After supper, he did the same thing with the cup: "This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you. Each time you drink this cup, remember me."*

*What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you are retelling the message of the Lord's death, that he has died for you. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns.*

We are about to participate in a ritual. An ancient ritual. A ritual practiced for two thousand years, countless thousands of times, in countless thousands of places, in languages beyond number, in countries spanning the globe. It is a ritual observed hundreds of times in the last 171 years by this congregation. It has been celebrated probably close to 500 times in the past 105 years in this very building. It is a ritual with many names: Communion, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, the Mass, the Sacrament of Bread and Wine, the Joyful Feast of the People of God. It has been called a Mystery, a Celebration, a Solemn Remembrance, a Thanksgiving. But above all, it is a ritual.

Rituals can be wonderful things, full of life and significance and meaning. But they can also be empty, a mere "going through the motions."

Think about the simplest possible ritual: think about, say, "hello" and "goodbye." Think about how many times you have said "hello" and "goodbye" in your life; how many times in a single day. Think about how empty those words often are. We say them without thinking. Now think about bumping into a long-lost friend unexpectedly: "Hello!" Or think about opening the door to a sister, a brother, a spouse, a family dear to your heart that you've been happily expecting to come for a special celebration: "Hello!" Think about seeing that child, that grandchild for the first time. "Hello!" Think about how much meaning that word, that ritual, has at a moment like that.

Or think about the word "Goodbye." How many times you have said this in your life; how many times in a single day? How many times has it really meant something beyond simply signifying the end of a conversation? But now think about what that word means when a loved one is going on a long journey. Think about what that word means when you know you're saying it to someone for the last time. Think about how much meaning that word, that ritual, had then.

Rituals can be wonderful things, important things, deep things, full of life and significance and meaning. But they can also be empty, a mere “going through the motions.” Because of that, we need to take some time to recognise the power inherent the ritual in which we will engage this morning.

And to bring life to this ritual – or, more accurately, to make us alive to it - I have to take you away from here, away from the stained glass and organ pipes and vaulted ceiling and hard pews, away from our fair city, from our green and pleasant province, across the Atlantic, across the Mediterranean, over the sandy beaches of Jaffa, up the rocky hills to Jerusalem, to Mount Zion, to a second-story walk-up rented room, women leaning against the walls, men gathered around a low table, among the dishes a clay plate of flat bread, a clay cup of red wine. And in the light of the flickering lamps, all eyes on him, is Jesus; and from the plate he takes a piece of the bread, he lifts it to heaven and blesses God for it, and he says, *“This is my body, given,” he says, as he breaks the bread, “given for you. Do this to remember me.”*

And the eyes of Peter grow wide, and John, reclining, sits up straight, and everyone looks at each other, and the women whisper, and Jesus holds the bread out to them but nobody moves, nobody understands, nobody’s heard such words before. Body? Given? Remember? What can he mean? But he motions to them, to take the bread, and slowly, reluctantly, wonderingly, they do; and they break it, and they pass it along, until all have shared of the bread he called his body.

And from among the cups Jesus lifts one brim-full with red Passover wine, raises it to heaven, blesses God for it, and says, *“This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you. Each time you drink this cup, remember me.”* And he holds it out to Peter, who doesn’t want to take it, but Jesus just keeps holding it, holding it, until Peter grips it in his own hard fisherman’s hand, and looking suspiciously into it, lifts it to his lips, then passes it to John, who passes it to Thomas, who passes it along, until all have shared of the wine Jesus called his blood.

And it was only a day later that the body of Jesus was indeed given, his blood indeed shed, and they remembered the words he said. *“Given for you,”* he had said. *“Shed for you. Remember.”* How could they ever forget?

And it was fifty days after that, standing in that same room, ten times the number which had gathered on that first night, hardly space to breathe, when Peter said, *“We were with him on that night. We were with him in this room, this very room, when he said the words, when he broke the bread, when he passed the cup, when he told us to remember. And now we do, and so we’ll share again, and we’ll remember, and we’ll never forget what he did for us, for everyone.”* And when he had said the words, he too, as Jesus had done, broke the bread, passed the cup, and everyone remembered, and it was as though Jesus was among them again, becoming one with them, as surely he was, as surely he was.

And when the story spread, and others, in communities near and far, came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and that his body had been given, his blood shed for them; the meal helped them remember, too. And when they remembered, when they shared, it was as though Jesus was among them, becoming one with them, as surely he was, as surely he was.

Years later, in far-away Corinth, where no-one among them had ever met Jesus face-to-face; where few among them had been to where Jesus had walked, had healed, had taught; where they had come to faith through hearing of Jesus through the words of Paul; Paul passed the story of the meal on to them. Paul shared with them the bread, the wine, the words of that night:

*“What you must solemnly realize,” said Paul, “is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you are retelling the message of the Lord’s death, that he has died for you. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns.”*

And when the Christians of Corinth broke the bread, when they shared the cup, it was just as it was for the others in Jerusalem; it was as though Jesus was among them, becoming one with them, as surely he was, as surely he was.

So now come back with me, across the blue Med, across the green Atlantic, over the red shores of PEI, the greening fields, the budding trees, to the harbour city of Charlottetown, to this congregation gathered on an May Spring Sunday, where the bread will be broken, the cup passed, and just as it was for those in AD 53 Corinth, just as it was for those in AD 33 Jerusalem, so it shall be for us: through this ancient ritual, it will be as though Jesus is among us, becoming one with us, as surely he is, as surely he is.

For now it is our turn. Now it is our ritual. Now it is our Communion. Now it is we who are called to Remember. Now it is to us the words of Jesus are spoken: *“Every time you come together and share the bread and wine, remember me. Remember what I said to you, what I did for you. Remember me.”* Every time we share communion we draw ourselves back into that upper room. Every time we share, there we are, right then, right there, together with Jesus, he with us. Through this ritual, we are in relationship with Jesus again. Through this ritual, we are in relationship with the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit; Through this ritual, we are in relationship with the Living God.

Which is the goal of everything Jesus teaches, says, does: to bring us into relationship with the God who loves us, to heal the broken relationships between us and God, us and one another, and to set us on the path to living a life of response to God’s astonishing love, a life that is characterised by mercy and help, compassion and joy.

And so we come to the ritual. We come to the table. We can approach the table simply by going through the motions, believing that the ritual of Communion, the proper setting, the proper words, the proper elements, and our participation in it – our following the rules – will satisfy an obligation we have. Our participation will, we hope, somehow satisfy God.

To approach this ritual properly, however - to approach this ritual relationally - is more than satisfying an obligation. It is to be transported back to an upper room of long ago, to a group of people gathered around a table, and to one who says, *“Think of this bread as me. I’m giving myself for you. I’m becoming part of you. You’re becoming joined with me. We are one. Together, we are one with the God who loves us all. Do this, to help you remember me, and my love for you.”*

To approach the table properly is to watch the cup being raised, and to hear his voice say, *“I will give myself – sacrifice myself – for you, in your place, to make a new covenant, a*

*new agreement, to open the door between you and God. This wine, this symbol of my blood, will help you remember the extent to which the love of God has gone to welcome you home.”*

To approach the table properly - to approach this ritual relationally - is to be joined together with that table, that first table, with those who first heard the words, and with the one who first spoke them. It is to be joined together with all who have remembered those words, who have shared together since that first time, and it is to be joined as one with all who do so today, here and around the world; to be joined with those who, right here, this past century and more, who have shared the bread and the cup.

The ritual is ancient. The ritual is beautiful. The ritual is something we share with a billion others this day. But what we are about to do is not about the ritual. It is all about the heart. It is all about the relationship behind it all. It is all about the relationship between the God who came to our hurting world in Jesus Christ, and between we who seek to respond to that amazing, grace-filled love. It is all about the heart. As we share. As we remember.

And as we remember, by the grace of God, a miracle: As we remember, as we share the stories and memories of Christ, as we share this meal together, as we lift a cup in memory, in celebration; as we remember, we do not remember one who is dead and gone and far, far away. As we remember, it is not only *as though* Jesus is with us; the miracle of Communion is that Jesus *is* with us. The miracle is that Jesus, who once was dead, *is* alive. It is the very life of Jesus, among us, within us, the power of the Spirit in, under, around and through us, which gives us life, which gives us hope, which transforms us into the very children of God – it is that which makes this real. It is that which makes this holy – which makes *us* holy – as we remember. As we remember.

Know, through this ritual, that no matter where you are in your life this morning, you are not there alone. Jesus is with you. No matter what you brought with you this morning - the stresses and strains of the week, the distractions, the worries, the joys – they are shared by him. Joy and sorrow, worry and relief, grief and celebration, you do not carry them alone. He carries them with you. The things of which we are proud, he celebrates with us; for those things of which we are ashamed, he offers forgiveness, a fresh start. The one who made you, the one who gave you life, the one who keeps you going and calls you his own; He is with us. Here. Within us. Not just here, but always, ever. Here, now, with this meal, through these reminders: Jesus. With us. Here. We bring that to mind. We make it a part of us. That’s what lifts this beyond ritual. That’s what makes it personal. That’s what makes it real. As we remember.

Through this bread, through this wine, know that God loves you, has given himself for you, and will never let you go. Through this bread, through this wine, join with your brothers and your sisters here and throughout the world in celebrating and responding to that love. Through this ancient and timeless ritual, open your heart – and remember. Amen.