

**Sermon for Zion, May 26, 2019** – Family Communion, Church Anniversary

**Hymns:** 299 - Holy, Holy, Holy; 526 – Lift Up Your Hearts Unto the Lord;  
775 – Sent Forth By Your Blessing

**Scripture:** Mark 14:22-26; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

**Sermon Title:** What Communion Is

*Mark 14:22-26 (New English Translation)*

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after giving thanks he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take it. This is my body.” And after taking the cup and giving thanks, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, that is poured out for many. I tell you the truth; I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” After singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

*1 Corinthians 11:23-26 (Phillips)*

*The teaching I gave you was given me personally by the Lord himself, and it was this: the Lord Jesus, in the same night in which he was betrayed, took bread and when he had given thanks he broke it and said, “Take, eat, this is my body which is being broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” Similarly when supper was ended, he took the cup saying, “This cup is the new agreement in my blood: do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.*

*This can only mean that whenever you eat this bread or drink of this cup, you are proclaiming that the Lord has died for you, and you will do that until he comes again.*

What is Communion? What are we doing when we celebrate Communion? Why is it called Communion, and why do we say we are celebrating when we do it? What happens when we have Communion? Why are children now invited to participate?

On its most basic level, we do Communion because Jesus told us to, and the Church took this seriously, and still does. In the Scripture readings, we heard from Mark and from Paul about that first Communion of long ago, that night when Jesus shared a Passover meal with his disciples, startling them with words never spoken at Passover before: “This is my body, given for you; my blood, shed for you. Do this,” says Jesus, “in remembrance of me.”

When we have Communion, we are remembering that night; we are gathering together, and hearing the words, and sharing the bread and wine, just as Jesus asked, on that night long ago. We are remembering Jesus, and what he did, and through the

bread and the wine, we are remembering that he gave his very body and blood - he gave his life through his death on the cross - so that we could live again, in forgiveness and in peace. That's why we do Communion. We do it to remember what Jesus did for us, and for the world.

It is called Communion because to have Communion, you have to come together. The dictionary defines the word "communion" as "*sharing, participation, fellowship.*" Our little green Living Faith book tells us Communion "*deepens our union with Himself and with each other,*" that, "*together as His church (we) offer Him thanks.*" Communion is that time when we are "*joined together and lifted up to God,*" as Calvin was fond of saying. In Communion, nobody eats alone. Communion is about being in community, in relationship, with one another. We all participate together, even as Jesus gave himself not for any one of us, but for all of us. Together we share the bread and wine, the family meal of the church; together we share our common faith and hope.

Communion is also called "The Eucharist," the Greek word meaning "good gift," a word used in the Bible for thanking God. Communion is sometimes called The Eucharist because Jesus gave thanks and blessings to God for the bread and the wine, the good gifts of life, and we too thank God and bless him for the bread and the wine, and the good gift of life through Christ.

Communion is also called the Lord's Supper, because on its most basic level, it is a meal together. But it is no ordinary meal; it is the **Lord's** Supper. It is held in the house of God; God is among us as we gather, God is our host, and brings the gift of his Grace. We are invited to this meal, on behalf of God, who has called us together. That is why everyone is welcome, whether you are a Presbyterian or a Baptist or an Anglican or Roman Catholic or not even sure at all. Our service says, "*Our Lord invites all those who trust him, to share this feast.*" That is the only requirement.

Finally, this meal is called a "Sacrament." Sacrament is a fancy Latin word which means something which signifies, or points to, or represents, or stands for, something else. Think of a policeman's badge; it is just a piece of metal, but it represents the entire Canadian legal system. When you see that badge, you understand what it represents. Usually, a ticket! In the church, water, bread and wine – the elements of Baptism and Communion - represent something much bigger than themselves, too. They represent the Grace of God.

Communion is a sacrament because it represents something more than just what it appears to be. The gathering together represents that meal that Jesus had with his disciples long ago. The bread represents the body of Christ, which was sacrificed for us, on our behalf. The wine represents the blood of Christ, which was shed for us, on our behalf. In this sacrament, we are bringing ourselves back some two thousand years, to that night when Jesus shared a Passover meal with his friends. We are there. We are those friends. We are sharing the life of Jesus, we are receiving the Grace of God. That is a sacrament.

What happens when we have Communion? First, we are brought together, gathered together, we are sharing together. From all of our separate lives, we are brought to this one place, and we become one church, one family, one body.

Second, as we hear the words and pray the prayers and share the bread and wine, as we remember what God has done through Jesus, we are given the opportunity to look inside ourselves and ask ourselves how we might better reflect the love that God has given us, how we might respond to what God has done. And as we look around, we are given the opportunity to consider how we are part of this family, and what we can do to serve it and one another better.

And finally, as we share this meal, this Communion, we are aware that God is with us in a special way; that the Spirit of God has a chance to refresh us, enliven us, encourage and strengthen us, as we turn our hearts toward God. Together, as we pray, as we celebrate, as we share together, we are lifted up to God.

There is much that goes on in Communion that is beyond our understanding; it is a thing of substance, in very real bread and very real wine, and yet it is also a thing of the Spirit, no less real, but harder to explain, harder to understand. God, somehow, somehow, moves through this celebration. Somehow what we do today is a channel for God's grace. This is a mystery, but no less real for all that. Many of the most wonderful things that happen to us, which we experience in life, are beyond our ability to understand or explain. The knitting together of a child in its mother's womb; the feeling which overwhelms us when we hold someone we love; how a sunset, or the swell of the ocean, or a night filled with stars, can take our breath away, can fill us with awe. These are not things we can always explain. They are, in some ways, a mystery. But they are no less real for all that. God, somehow, somehow, moves through this celebration. Somehow what we do today is a channel for God's grace. A mystery. But no less real for all that.

Finally, every time we celebrate Communion, we are made members of a family worldwide. All around the world, people are gathering to share together this special meal of remembrance, this family feast. Thousands of people. Millions, even hundreds of millions, all saying, in different languages, the same words; all sharing the bread and wine of Christ. Together. As family. That which we are doing today goes beyond the walls of this church, and unites us with the world, with the church universal, and with the celebration of praise in heaven itself, celebrated together by the adopted children of the Creator of all that is.

Communion, though, isn't just a ritual. It isn't just a mystery. It's a miracle. For 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 Holy 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 share.

No matter where you are in 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. Not just here, but always, ever. Here, now, with this meal, through these reminders: Jesus. Is with us. Here. Becoming a part of us. As we remember.

Finally, why, in the Presbyterian Church, have children not always been included in communion? At the time of the founding of the Presbyterian Church, there was a concern that Communion had become an empty ritual, thoughtlessly consumed. There was a concern that children couldn't understand the theological mysteries which Communion conveys. And there was, above all, a concern that only adults could follow the Apostle Paul's warning to the church in Corinth, that to participate in Communion without "discernment" was to invite trouble. Listen (1 Cor 11:27-29):

*So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves.*

Why does Paul write these words? Because in Corinth, as Paul explains earlier in the chapter, Communion had become a source of division, rather than of unity. Communion was dividing the church between wealthy and poor. In Corinth, Communion wasn't cubes of bread and little glasses of juice. Then, there, the well-to-do were treating Communion as a pot-luck party, bringing delicacies to share amongst themselves, while the poor in the congregation could only watch and go hungry. The well-off were bringing the old common Corinthian Pagan practice of "drinking banquet," or "bacchanal," into the church as a replacement for Communion. And, says, Paul, that's not what Communion is about. And if you celebrate Communion as a drunken party, excluding and shaming others, you are failing to discern that Communion is a time of remembering the sacrifice of Christ, and what he has done for us and for the world. If your celebration hurts and divides, and loses its focus on Christ, don't expect to receive a blessing, but a judgement.

As you can see, Paul's words are not intended to exclude children. They are intended to warn those adults who are treating it, and one another, as a private party, as a source of division, as a joke.

Children belong at Communion, every bit as much as children belong at Passover. The Passover meal which Jesus and his followers were celebrating that night long ago, out of which Communion came into being, is still observed in faithful Jewish families around the world. And children play an important part in the Passover celebration – they have the job of asking the Four Questions, which lead to the telling of the Passover story, beginning with, "Why is this night different from every other night?" It is the job of the youngest child to ask the questions. If, tragically, there are no children present, the youngest adult plays the part of the child, and asks the question in their place.

The children this morning, many of whom are having Communion for the first time, have been learning about Communion in Sunday School. But I hope they ask their parents, their grandparents, too: "Why is this service different from every other service?" And it is then our role, and our great privilege, to tell the story to our children, our grandchildren, of what Jesus has done for us and for all the world,

in his great and undying love. The simplest answer can be, “Because God loves us very much, and has made us his family. He showed us how much he loves us by sending Jesus to us. And you’re a part of that family. And families do things together. And when we share Communion, it reminds us that Jesus is with us still.” That’s a great place to start.

I pray that for each of us, for all of us, this Communion, every Communion, will be a time of encountering Jesus Christ. That through the symbols of bread, of wine, it will not only be *as though* Jesus is with us; but that Jesus *is* with us. The very life of Jesus, among us, within us, the power of the Holy Spirit in, under, around and through us, giving us life, giving us hope, transforming us – all of us - into the very children of God, making this real. Making this holy – making *us* holy – as we remember. As we remember.

Christ among us. Christ within us. By the grace of God, one people, united by the Father of us all. Rejoice, brothers and sisters of Jesus, as we join together, one family, one Spirit, at the table of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

*“This is my body, given for you... This is my blood... When you do this, remember me... And ‘Lo,’ I am with you, always.” Amen.*