

## “Communion”

### *Why Do We Do That? part 1*

*I Corinthians 11:17-34*

*Welcome, prayer.*

[55] Have you ever been around a toddler who won't stop asking why? “Why is the sky blue? Why do cars stop on red? Why dogs bark, but cats meow? Why does Daddy have to go to work? Why does Mommy have a meeting? Why can't I have chocolate for dinner?” (Even I'm still waiting for that answer.)

While I don't have all the answers, there are times when I think we need to ask similar questions about worship. We have a lot of traditions we take for granted. Why do we say the Lord's Prayer? Why do we baptize and receive communion? What even is the Apostle's Creed? Why do any of those things matter?

When I went through confirmation class at 12-years old, I memorized a bunch of stuff, but I never felt like I was given permission to ask, “Why?” In the next four weeks, we are going to examine some of traditions in our church we seldom stop to consider, so that we can understand deeper their meaning for our faith.

[56] Today's is probably my favorite topic: Communion. I have had more conversations about communion than any other sacrament or practice in the church. How we receive it, why we receive it, when we receive it. Honestly, some of those conversations have been difficult, because this sacrament is so sacred and dear to the followers of Christ and some of the differences so pronounced.

[57] We know that Jesus instituted the sacrament of communion at the Last Supper, the Passover meal he shared with his disciples before dying on the cross. Three of the four gospels record Jesus taking bread, breaking it, and giving it to his disciples with the words, “This is my body, broken for you.” (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22) The gospels share how Jesus took a cup of wine, blessed it, and shared it with his disciples with the words, “This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins.” Since the beginning of the Christian Church, this sacrament has been celebrated in worship.

[58] Communion is a sacrament that transcends time and denominations. We call it by different names. We say, “The Lord's Supper,” recalling the memory

of the Last Supper. In that way, this meal is a sort of memorial. We also use the word “Eucharist,” which comes from the Greek word for “thanksgiving.” It tells us of the celebration, the gratefulness we feel remembering the sacrifice Jesus made for our forgiveness.

I prefer to call it “communion”, which is from the same root word as “commune” and “community”. When we call this sacrament “communion”, we remind ourselves that we are one in Christ. Together, we are all his Body.

[59] Community matters. The Apostle Paul was trying to explain this to the Corinthians in the letter he wrote to them. They were having serious issues in their church. The people in Corinth were getting drunk, over-indulging in food while watching others go hungry, and then celebrating the Lord’s Supper together as if everything was hunky-dory. Paul had to chastise them, remind them of what they were actually doing, and so help them reclaim the depth and sacredness of this rite.

[60] Paul reminded them of what Jesus actually said, the night of the Last Supper: “This is my body...This is my blood.” Paul was reminding them, this is what it’s all about: Jesus’ body, his blood, his sacrifice. The Corinthians had taken the Lord’s Supper for granted, and they were destroying their community. Paul warned them to remember the holiness of the meal. The Message version of the Bible puts it like this: “You must never let familiarity breed contempt.”

[61] In the United Methodist Church, the bread and wine are symbols of Jesus’ body and blood. Other churches believe in transubstantiation...that when the priest pronounces the blessing, the elements literally become the body and blood of Christ, even though they don’t appear to change. If you believe the bread and wine are literally Christ’s body, you are definitely going to take communion seriously and handle it with utmost care. I understand. However, we don’t believe in transubstantiation in our church.

What we do believe is communion is sacred, consecrated by the pastor in the presence of the people in a deep and meaningful moment. An elder or licensed pastor can preside over communion, yet the congregation’s presence is necessary as well. You all play as much a part in the liturgy as I do. That’s why I love communion! It takes a community to consecrate it.

And we do handle it carefully. We believe the Holy Spirit is present in this sacrament. We don't throw the unused bread out. We don't pour the unused juice down the drain. The elements are used up or returned to the earth, spread for the birds to eat, poured into the ground, even given to a family to be consumed later, but never wasted.

[62] This sacrament is important. We want to understand both the gravity of what we are doing, and the joyous freedom we can experience through communion. I would love it if you would open up your hymnals to page 12 and allow me to walk through some of the liturgy with you, to understand better how we prepare ourselves to receive communion.

First of all, communion begins with a confession. Similar to the Twelve Steps from Alcoholics Anonymous, step one is: Admit you have a problem. Confession is about acknowledging our sin before God and before one other. We've all messed up. Confession is a little like vomiting a poison out of your system. God doesn't want us to hold on to our baggage. If communion is about God's grace, then we should acknowledge our desperate need to be forgiven. I think we should never receive communion without confessing first.

Confession naturally leads to pardon. This is my favorite part of the liturgy. Look what it says. “Pastor to the people: ‘In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.’” And then the response. (Don't miss this.) “The people to the pastor: ‘In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.’” There is no hierarchy here. There is no “Holier than thou.” I need to be forgiven as much as you do. You pronounce forgiveness to me, and I to you. How beautiful is that?

The pardon is followed by the passing of the peace. In this liturgy, there is a place for an exchange of words. It's not a superficial, “Good morning. How are you?” We don't talk about the weather or sports at this point. We offer the peace of Christ to each other. You can choose from many different expressions. “Peace be with you.” “Shalom,” which is Hebrew for peace. At this point, someone could literally say, “I forgive you. Do you forgive me?” This is the moment of grace, the touch of a hand, the look in the eye, when we become agents of reconciliation to each other. What words you use don't matter as long as you offer love and peace to one another.

Once we are forgiven and reconciled, the liturgy says, it is the proper time to take up an offering, and the bread and wine can be brought forward. In early Christian Church, the bread and wine were home-made. They were presented to the priests, who examined them to see if they were acceptable for the worship service. They were brought as an offering.

Following the offering, we give thanks. In the communion liturgy, we say “The Great Thanksgiving.” We thank God for his wonderful works, and we re-tell the story of Jesus. This is great, because we should expect, every Sunday, that someone could be here for the very first time, wanting to know the story of Jesus. We proclaim the holiness and perfection of God. We praise God. The people respond to the pastor’s words. We ask the Holy Spirit to be present, not just in the bread and juice, but on all of us together. That’s powerful.

We recite the Lord’s Prayer together, and then everyone comes forward. In the United Methodist Church, we practice the “open” table. We believe that anyone can experience salvation in this moment. This is a means of grace, an experience with God Almighty and the Risen Savior Jesus. We would never want to prevent someone from having that.

[63] Pause for a moment, now. Is all this on your mind when you come forward? Do you know that at this very moment, the person in front of you could be wrestling spiritually? They might be ready to allow Jesus into their life for the very first time. We could be falling on our knees. Everyone of us should desperately pray for the person who, ten seconds before us, is going to receive the symbols of our forgiveness, the very presence of Jesus Christ. This could be their moment. We need to pray for them.

[64] In the United Methodist Church, children are always welcome at the sacrament. Someone might say, how can they understand all of this? Confession? Pardon? The Great Thanksgiving? Think of it this way: what child doesn’t understand hunger and thirst? Children understand more of the grace of Jesus, in this moment than in any sermon I will ever give. This sacrament is about community. It’s about families. It’s about all of us. You and me. Adults and children. We all need forgiveness. And if a simple piece of bread and a cup of grape juice can bring someone to a greater understanding of Jesus Christ, no matter their age, this is the place to share that.

[65] I once brought communion to a nursing home and offered them to a man with dementia. He did something I'll never forget. As I broke the bread in half, intending to tear off a small piece for him, he took the whole half loaf. I was a little shocked, but then I thought, “Isn't that appropriate?” Get all you can of Christ! Be hungry for a relationship with the Son of God. Put all your heart and voice into this liturgy. Soak up the words. Pray like crazy for the person in front of you. Passionately, affectionately, remember how Christ has forgiven us. That's what communion is all about.

Memory Verse **Luke 22:19** “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”

#### Reflection questions

1. When have you been really hungry? What did it feel like to finally be fed?
2. What is your earliest memory of communion?
3. Why is it important to be at peace with one another before receiving communion?
4. How does it feel to remember Jesus' sacrifice for our sins? Does consuming the bread and juice bring you closer to the cross?
5. How does it feel to be forgiven?