

Community of Communion

Matthew 26:26-28 & 1 Corinthians 11:26

As I prepared today's sermon, I had to take out my ordination paper that I wrote almost 15 years ago. At that time, the question was, "From a biblical and theological standpoint, what is the meaning of the Sacrament of Holy Communion in the UMC?" As we reflect on who we are as God's Community, it naturally leads us to ask ourselves: "How are we supposed to prepare our own hearts to receive Communion?"

What are the meanings of Holy Communion?

I believe there are at least four important meanings of Communion, and we need to remember them carefully.

1. Jesus Christ ordained Holy Communion by his own death & resurrection.

In our Protestant tradition, there are only **two Sacraments (Sacrament means sacred oath or pledge), Baptism and Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper**. In the Catholic church, there are seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Reconciliation (or Confession or Penance), the Anointing of the Sick, Marriage, and Holy Orders (ordinations of deacons, priests, or bishops). The reason we have just two sacraments in our tradition is because baptism and communion are instituted by Jesus, and he commanded his church to observe them.

Today's Scripture is about Jesus' institution of communion during the Passover meal with his disciples. Before this, Matthew 26 starts with a plan for the high priests and the elders of the people to kill Jesus. So, the institution of communion is made in the context of persecution for Jesus and his imminent death.

There were severe divisions in the Corinthian church. They brought their divisions to worship. Some were well-fed with their own meals, while others, unable to provide for themselves, went hungry. The fed didn't care for the unfed in the Lord's Supper. In the context of church divisions and conflicts, Apostle Paul reminds them of Jesus' institution of Communion. As Apostle Paul re-taught Jesus' institution of Communion, he intentionally added these words: "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" (1 Corinthians 11:23 NRSV). It was the night of Jesus' betrayal, and at the same time, it was the night even Judas Iscariot was not rejected to join the table with Jesus.

When the church is in persecution, conflict, and troubles, we need to go back to the meanings of Communion and hold onto them persistently.

2. Holy Communion is the outward sign of God's gift of inward grace.

In Communion, we can experience God's love, forgiveness, healing, renewal, transformation, and restoration. As Methodists, we believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ in Communion. Unlike the doctrine of transubstantiation, we do not believe that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ.

John Wesley would give Communion to those who didn't have faith in Jesus Christ, which led to criticism of his practices. But he noticed so many people came to know Jesus, repented their sins, and joined the church after they received Communion. John Wesley experienced God's outpouring of grace to even non-believers during Communion. For him, Communion was a wonderful vehicle of evangelism because God's grace was undeniably evident there.

More than that, we need Holy Communion for our sanctification. Let me quote John Wesley on Communion:

"The grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon of our sins by enabling us to leave them. As our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and blood of Christ. This is the food of our souls: this gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection. If therefore we have any regard for the plain command of Christ, if we desire the pardon of our sins, if we wish for strength to believe, to love and obey God, then we should neglect no opportunity of receiving the Lord's Supper." (John Wesley, *The Duty of Constant Communion (Sermon 101)*, §1.3).

3. Through Holy Communion, we unite with the Universal Church.

In our faith confession through the Apostle's Creed today, we proclaimed, *"I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic church, the Communion of Saints..."* Here, the Catholic church emphasizes the universal nature of the church, not limited to any specific denominations but embracing all believers across time, space, and culture. It is also called the Universal Church.

That is why United Methodists practice *"Open Communion."* We believe that Christ invites to the table those who love him, earnestly repent of their sins, and seek to be at peace with one another.

Today we lit candles remembering our loved ones who have passed away. At the same time, we must not forget that we are all members of God's Universal Church. We must open our hearts to anyone who wishes to be part of Jesus' family and we must look forward to our reunion with all the saints, including our loved ones who died in Christ. That is why *Holy Communion is a celebration of our reunion with Christ and all the Saints in the Universal church. It is also a guidepost for heaven.*

4. Holy Communion is a reminder of our missions in the world.

“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” (1 Corinthians 11:26 NRSV).

How often do we practice Communion? We can have Communion as often as we can, according to 1 Corinthians 11:26. Some churches have it quarterly. Others monthly like us. We can have Communion as often as we can.

Whenever we have Communion, we must remember the Gospel message of Jesus Christ and proclaim it to the world. That is why Communion has a missional aspect. What is the Gospel? That God so loved the world. So, he sacrificed Jesus Christ on the cross to atone for our sins, and Jesus was the first to be raised from the dead for us (1 Corinthians 15:20 NIV).

“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16 NRSV). Our partaking in Communion is our *koinonia* (fellowship or sharing) with Jesus Christ. As we participate in Jesus’ suffering, we are extending our fellowship to the world, which is our mission.

Then, our mission can be simply defined as **“our participation in God through the suffering of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit to the end that God be glorified in the nations and in all of his creation.”** Scott Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Mission* (2013), 173.

How, then, should we prepare ourselves to receive Communion?

Let us read the Scripture on the screen together.

“For anyone who eats and drinks without solemn reverence and heartfelt gratitude for the sacrifice of Christ, eats and drinks a judgment on himself if he does not recognize the body of Christ. That careless and unworthy participation is the reason why many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep in death.”(1 Corinthians 11:29-30 AMP)

Meditate on what Jesus Christ did for you on the cross. Communion is also called **“Eucharist,”** which means **“thanksgiving.”** Our heartfelt gratitude for Jesus’ sacrifice is a right mind and attitude for Communion. Also, we are to **“recognize (or discern) the body of Christ.”** How can we do that? According to the Amplified Bible’s note, **“We must respect Christ’s sacrifice and our fellow believers for whom Christ also died.”**

If anyone needs your forgiveness or you need to ask for theirs, you have to act out the grace you have received from our Lord. Also, when you receive Communion, you have to exercise your faith. Communion is one of the means of grace in the Protestant Church, including our denomination. So, we receive the bread and cup with faith that God’s transformative power and grace are present with us as we practice Communion together.