

# THE MEANING AND PRACTICE OF HOLY COMMUNION

Rev. Dr. Bill Jones

Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper, is breaking bread and drinking from the cup with the living, risen Jesus Christ and with our brothers and sisters in Christ at the Lord's Table. Like baptism, Holy Communion is regarded by Protestants as a sacrament. That is, it's an act of worship ordained by Christ and is a means of grace. This does not mean that we become any more worthy of God's grace by taking part in Communion. Rather, we open ourselves to the divine love that's already there; we become more ready to receive that love and to respond to it. All are welcome at the Table of the Lord because God's grace is freely offered to all made available to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and works in our lives through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. A sacrament has these characteristics: Jesus Christ asked his followers to do it ("Do this in remembrance of me . . ."); there is some physical symbol to it (bread and wine); God has promised to give his grace, to which the response is faith.

As with baptism, we use common, physical gifts of the earth, bread and wine – though in United Methodist churches we prefer unfermented grape juice. All Christians are welcome at our table, whatever their denomination. Holy Communion is a family meal, and all Christians are members of Christ's family.

Remembering Jesus' words (Mark 10:13-16), young children are welcome at the table as well. A small child eating and drinking at the Lord's Supper already connects being fed with being loved and feels included at the table rather than excluded. Because this holy meal is a sacrament of God's grace, God reveals facets of the mystery of the gospel to children at whatever their stage of development as they share in this holy meal. Do they full understand what they are doing? No, but do any of us? Therefore, in each congregation, when we receive the bread and cup, we join with millions of brothers and sisters across the ages and around the world of all ages and stages.

Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper is a mystery too deep for words. Its meaning will vary for each of us and from one time to another. But three essential meanings are integral to our understanding of Communion and are reflected in the prayer of The Great Thanksgiving in our

Communion service: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again" (*The United Methodist Hymnal, 1989*, page 14).

### ***Christ has died***

In part, Communion is a time to remember Jesus' death, his self-giving sacrifice on our behalf. As he said to the disciples at their last meal together, "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24).

In remembering his passion and crucifixion, we remember our own guilt; for we know that in our sin we crucify Christ many times over from day to day. So the Lord's Supper is a time of confession: "We confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart . . . We have not heard the cry of the needy" (*The United Methodist Hymnal, 1989*, page 12).

### ***Christ has risen***

But Communion is not a memorial service for a dead Jesus. It's not a time to wallow in our own guilt. It's a time to celebrate the resurrection, to recognize the living presence of Christ among us – though we do not claim, as some denominations do, that they become Christ's body and blood. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, the risen Jesus is present at this meal, giving us these gifts of bread and wine. There is a spiritual presence, but not a bodily presence. In giving these gifts, Jesus gives himself in love, offering forgiveness and new life. As we partake of this meal, we receive in us the life of God and increasingly reflect in our own lives the love that is in Jesus Christ.

In the resurrection story in Luke's Gospel, the Risen Christ broke bread with two of his followers at Emmaus, "then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him" (Luke 24:31). So, as we are nourished by this meal, our eyes are opened; and we recognize Christ here in the midst of our congregation, our community, and our world. What's our response? Thanksgiving! In fact, another of our words for Communion, the Eucharist, means thanksgiving.

## ***Christ will come again***

In Communion we also celebrate the final victory of Christ. We eat and drink there “until he comes” in final victory (1 Corinthians 11:26). The bread and cup of our salvation is a foretaste of heaven for each of us and a foretaste of the messianic feast, God’s ultimate victory banquet. We anticipate God’s coming reign, God’s future for this and all creation. As Jesus said, *I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom* (Matthew 26:29).

We believe that we are partners with God in creating this future, but the demands of discipleship are rigorous. In the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper, in the fellowship of Christian friends gathered at this table, we find the nourishment we need for the tasks of discipleship ahead. The Risen Christ is with us! We are new creatures! We are nourished and strengthened and made ready for ministry in his world!

### **The Four Actions of Holy Communion**

(adapted from *The United Methodist Book of Worship, 1992*, pages 27-31)

The four actions of Holy Communion are based on the actions of Jesus in the upper room (see Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-26; Luke 22:7-20):

#### **THANKSGIVING**

1. Taking the bread and cup
2. The prayer of Great Thanksgiving

#### **COMMUNION**

3. Breaking the bread
4. Giving the bread and cup

The pairing of these four actions shows the appropriateness of other common names for the Lord's Supper. Eucharist means "thanksgiving," while Holy Communion is linked to our communion with Christ and one another as we share the bread and the cup.

### **Taking the Bread and Cup**

The pastor, standing behind the Lord's Table, takes the bread and cup, which have been placed on the Lord's Table, and prepares them for the meal. It is traditional that there be a white linen cloth covering the top of the Lord's Table under the bread and cup.

The bread may be either leavened or unleavened. The use of a large uncut loaf of bread, which later in the service is broken and distributed to the people, follows the practice reported by Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 and symbolizes the fact that the Church is one body in Christ. In addition, at Williamsburg UMC, gluten-free bread is made available for those who cannot eat wheat.

A large cup, commonly called the chalice, is also a symbol of unity in Christ. Although the historic and ecumenical Christian practice has been to use wine, the use of unfermented grape juice by The United Methodist Church and its predecessors since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century expresses pastoral concern for recovering alcoholics, enables the participation of children and youth, and supports the church's witness of abstinence. Individual cups may be used, but when a chalice (or "common cup") is used, the bread and wine are often received by intinction, that is, by dipping a piece of bread into the cup.

### **The Great Thanksgiving**

Our Eucharistic prayers today are shaped much like the Great Thanksgivings that were prayed during the early centuries of Christian worship.

As Jesus gave thanks over the bread and cup, so do the pastor and people. This prayer is led by the pastor appointed to the congregation and authorized by the bishop to administer the Sacraments, or by some other ordained elder. When a pastor or other ordained minister presides at this holy table in the name of Christ, he or she is a steward to whom is entrusted a sacred responsibility to pass on to the congregation this holy mystery that is beyond the understanding of any of us.

After an introductory dialogue between pastor and people, the pastor gives thanks appropriate to the occasion, remembering God's acts of salvation and the institution of the Lord's Supper, and invokes the present work of the Holy Spirit, concluding with praise to the Trinity.

All pray the Lord's Prayer, which forms a bridge between the first pair of actions in Holy Communion (Thanksgiving) and the second pair (Communion).

### **Breaking the Bread**

The third of the four actions of Holy Communion, like the first, is brief and preliminary to the act that immediately follows. It is a sequence of gestures inviting the people to come to the meal. The pastor lifts the unbroken and uncut loaf of bread in full view of the people and breaks it by hand, in silence or with appropriate words. The pastor then raises the cup in silence or with appropriate words.

### **Giving the Bread and Cup**

In the fourth and last action of Holy Communion, the bread and cup are given to the people as Jesus gave them to the disciples. Laypersons as well as other clergy may assist the pastor in giving the bread and cup. All who intend to lead a Christian life, together with their children, are invited to receive the bread and cup. We have no tradition of refusing any who present themselves desiring to receive. Any or all of the people may receive them while standing, kneeling, or seated.

It is our custom to serve each person individually, while exchanging these or other words: "...the body of Christ, given for you" and "the blood of Christ, given for you." The congregation may sing hymns while the bread and cup are given.

After the people have been served, the Lords' table is set in order. A brief prayer of thanksgiving, prayed by the pastor or in unison, may conclude the giving of the bread and the cup after the people have been served.