

# *Maundy Thursday Reflections*

## 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:23-26

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ March 28, 2024 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



**<sup>23</sup> 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, <sup>24</sup> and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for<sup>[a]</sup> you. Do this in remembrance of me.” <sup>25</sup> In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” <sup>26</sup> For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:23-26, NRSV)**



Today is Maundy Thursday. Maundy is not a familiar word. In fact, the only time I’ve ever heard it used is to signify this day. The word comes from the Latin word “mandatum,” which means “commandment.” It’s where we get the English word “mandate.” It was on Thursday night, the night before his crucifixion, that Jesus gathered with his disciples to celebrate the Passover feast. At one point he got up from the meal, took off his outer garment, and began to wash their feet as a demonstration of how they in turn should treat one another. Afterwards he gave them what he called a “new commandment,” a “new mandate”: **“Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.”**<sup>1</sup> It was, of course, the same night he instituted what we now call the Lord’s Supper, which was another way to demonstrate the love Jesus has for us which we should imitate.

It is therefore on this Thursday night every year that the church gathers to remember what happened on that Thursday night long ago. Though we will not wash one another’s feet tonight, I do trust that we will still treat one another with the spirit of servanthood demonstrated in that act. We will, however, celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Even congregations that rarely celebrate the Lord’s Supper, at least do so on this evening.

Somebody asked me the other day why it is that only ministers can lead the Lord’s Supper. It’s a question I have received often over the years. It’s even apart of my official title, Minister of Word and Sacrament. Briefly, there are two reasons why only ordained ministers in our tradition can administer the sacraments of the Lord’s Supper and baptism. First, it speaks to the fact that the sacraments are crucially important in the life of the church. The second reason comes from the first, which is that over the course of history, there have been great abuses in the church when it comes to the sacraments. John Calvin, the great Protestant reformer who is essentially the father of our Reformed tradition, once said that the two marks of the true church were the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments.<sup>2</sup> In far too many congregations, congregations Calvin would have said do not represent the true church, the sacrament has been either abused or neglected. One of our jobs as pastors is to make sure that doesn’t happen.

When I was in junior high our church youth group participated in World Vision’s 30-Hour Famine to raise money and awareness for food insecurity in the world. Our own youth group does this every year and is raising sponsorships as we speak. About hour 26 of the famine I had reached my limit. As a 12-year-old I had even less discipline around food then I do now, and decided that I had to end the famine early, at least for me. Unfortunately, the only accessible food I knew about was the communion wafers which were stored underneath the back stairs that led from the fellowship hall to the sanctuary. So when the coast was clear, I slid off from the rest of the group, went to the secret spot, ripped open a package of semi-stale wafers, consumed the entire contents in less than 60 seconds, and then tried to cover up the evidence. I’m not sure it was the sort of abuse Calvin had in mind, and I don’t think my actions that day excluded me from the true church, but still it demonstrates how easy it is to misuse these gifts of bread and cup given to us as sacred gifts of grace.

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<sup>2</sup> To quote Calvin, “The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist.”

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:34.

The passage we just read from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11 speaks to instances of more serious abuse of the sacrament. Paul is writing to this church in Corinth which he loves, but which also is rampant with division and immorality. Among other things, this included how they are celebrating the Lord's Supper. Instead of the celebrations being gatherings of loving fellowship and spiritual enrichment, these meals had devolved into times of selfish indulgence where the more wealthy and prominent members of the church would shame the poorer members, mock the Lord's sacrificial death, and, in doing so, scandalize the church before the unbelieving world around them.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to some very pointed correction you can read in the surrounding verses, Paul gives them here what we now call the Words of Institution. He reminds them that these words were *instituted* (that's where we get the name) by Christ himself, that this meal isn't the stuff of legend, but one that actually happened just as the Gospel writers describe. Jesus literally broke bread and poured out a cup, used these elements to point his followers to his death on the cross, and commanded them to celebrate this meal regularly, remembering his sacrifice as they did. In fact, he made clear that his disciples, all the way down to us, should do so until he returned again one day. In doing so we proclaim the message of the gospel to a watching world. In a way, through this meal we are reenacting the gospel, rehearsing what the Lord has done for us, and not only for us, but for all people.

In looking at the Lord's Supper tonight, I want to do something unique together. I want to use a portion of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the creeds in our Book of Confessions, to remind us of the nature and power of this sacrament. Like all creeds, it was composed in the midst of controversy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century German church. One of the areas of controversy, which theologians were vehemently debating, was the Lord's Supper. Again, over the years, there has been tremendous confusion and abuse when it comes to this sacred meal.

So I want to have us say together the portion of the creed which was meant to bring clarity to this sacrament. You can follow along in your bulletin or on the screen. I gave it to you in print so that you can take it home and reflect further on this teaching. We will

pause between each question so I can offer a few brief insights. As one of your Ministers of Word and Sacrament, tonight I am trying to emphasize the sacrament part of my call.

*Question: How does the Lord's Supper signify and seal to you that you share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross and in all His gifts?*

***Answer: In this way: Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup in remembrance of Him. With this command He gave these promises: First, as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup given to me, so surely was His body offered for me and His blood poured out for me on the cross. Second, as surely as I receive from the hand of the minister and taste with my mouth the bread and the cup of the Lord as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely does He Himself nourish and refresh my soul to everlasting life with His crucified body and shed blood.***

Jesus did not *suggest* that his followers consider celebrating this meal. We are *commanded* to do so, all of us. And it's all of us because what is being proclaimed here is for all of us. To make it personal, Christ died on the cross for you. His body was broken for you. His blood was shed for you. And he has promised that his grace was not just a one-time event, but a daily provision, like daily bread, which he will provide for you along with each one in the church. There is great mystery here to be certain, but know that as you taste the bread and drink from the cup in a few moments, your spirit is being fed by Christ himself.

*Question: What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink His shed blood?*

***Answer: First, to accept with a believing heart all the suffering and the death of Christ, and so receive forgiveness of sins and life eternal. Second, to be united more and more to His sacred body through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us. Therefore, although Christ is in heaven and we are on earth, yet we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones, and we forever live and are governed by one Spirit, as the members of our body are by one soul.***

When we grew up we were told, "You are what you eat." It's true. The dinner I just ate tonight is literally becoming a part of me. That makes eating an incredible

<sup>3</sup> *Bible Outlines*, "1 Corinthians 11:17-34 — Correcting Abuses Regarding the Lord's Supper". Read online at <https://www.bibleoutlines.com/1-corinthians-1117-34-correcting-abuses-regarding-the-lords-supper/#:~:text=Instead%20of%20the%20celebrations%20being,the%20unbelieving%20world%20around%20them.>

act of commitment. It's fitting, therefore – brilliant, actually - that Jesus gave us a meal as this sacrament. To come and participate in this meal is an act of faith and commitment. Every time you come you are embracing with your whole heart, your whole life, the passion of Christ. You cannot swallow something half-heartedly. Taking the bread and the cup into you, you demonstrate your whole-hearted commitment. In receiving Christ, of course, we receive in return both the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life. Also, in this sacrament we are united to others in the church, one body of Christ. It's why we never celebrate the Lord's Supper in private; that would make no sense. It's always public, for the whole church, one loaf and one cup that points to one body.

*Question: Where has Christ promised that He will nourish and refresh believers with His body and blood as surely as they eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup?*

***Answer: In the institution of the Lord's supper: The Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. This promise is repeated by Paul where he says: The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.***

This was the problem in the Corinthian church. They were forgetting that this meal was not just about Christ's body crucified, risen and ascended to heaven, but that it was also about Christ's body here on earth, which is the church. As we come to the table, we recognize the brothers and sisters who come alongside us, aware that we are united by Christ. That's true of the one you adore just as much as the one you can barely tolerate, the one who is exactly like you, just like the one who shares almost nothing in common with you, apart from Christ.

*Question: Are then the bread and wine changed into the real body and blood of Christ?*

***Answer: No. Just as the water of baptism is not changed into the blood of Christ and is not the***

***washing away of sins itself but is simply God's sign and pledge, so also the bread in the Lord's supper does not become the body of Christ itself, although it is called Christ's body in keeping with the nature and usage of sacraments.***

Augustine classically defined a sacrament as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.” The sign itself is not the thing it points to. The bread is not the literal body of Jesus, but the tangible element we can see and taste which points to what we now cannot see, his actual body. Same with the cup. This does not mean, however, that the bread and cup are merely symbols. That leads us to our next question.

*Question: Why then does Christ call the bread His body and the cup His blood, or the new covenant in His blood, and why does Paul speak of a participation in the body and blood of Christ?*

***Answer: Christ speaks in this way for a good reason: He wants to teach us by His supper that as bread and wine sustain us in this temporal life, so His crucified body and shed blood are true food and drink for our souls to eternal life. But, even more important, He wants to assure us by this visible sign and pledge, first, that through the working of the Holy Spirit we share in His true body and blood as surely as we receive with our mouth these holy signs in remembrance of Him, and, second, that all His suffering and obedience are as certainly ours as if we personally had suffered and paid for our sins.***

Though in our tradition we do not believe that Jesus is physically present in the elements, we do believe that he is spiritually present in a special and unique way. Again, these are not just empty symbols. That means that just like the physical food we just ate for dinner will nourish our bodies for a while longer, the spiritual food we are about to consume will, in some mysterious way, nourish our spirits for a while longer.

This is, by the way, one of the reasons I try to gently correct people when they say that we shouldn't celebrate the Lord's Supper too often because it might become routine. Nobody ever says that about breakfast. Who tries to limit the times they sit down for a meal for fear that doing so might make eating routine? We eat to be nourished, and to share fellowship with others, which also nourishes. Sometimes those meals are special and memorable, and we can certainly do our best to make every mealtime special, but there are going to be times when sitting down to eat is completely

utilitarian, when we're just eating to get the calories in so we can get through the day. There may be reasons not to celebrate the Lord's Supper every time we gather – I think there are – but fear of it becoming routine cannot be one of them.

*Question: What difference is there between the Lord's supper and the papal mass?*

***Answer: The Lord's supper testifies to us, first, that we have complete forgiveness of all our sins through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself accomplished on the cross once for all; and, second, that through the Holy Spirit we are grafted into Christ, who with His true body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father, and this is where He wants to be worshipped. But the mass teaches, first, that the living and the dead do not have forgiveness of sins through the suffering of Christ unless He is still offered for them daily by the priests; and, second, that Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine, and there is to be worshipped. Therefore the mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry.***

Whether or not this is still the teaching of some in the church, it once was, and so is addressed here. To put it simply, the Lord's Supper itself does not make us forgiven. Our forgiveness was achieved at the cross, once and for all. As he died, Jesus declared, "It is finished!" Remember, the sacrament is a visible sign that points to this invisible reality, not the reality itself. You don't come eat this meal to be forgiven. You come because you are forgiven. And you come because you recognize that the grace which saved you is the same grace you need to sustain you and to form you in Christ. As Dallas Willard liked to say, "Christians burn through grace like a 747 burns through fuel." The Lord's Supper is one of the most powerful means of grace that Christ has given us.

*Question: Who are to come to the table of the Lord?*

***Answer: Those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and those who do not repent eat and drink judgment upon themselves.***

Who should come to the Lord's Table? Not everybody. Or, at least, only those who have come to meet these three criteria. First, before you come you should recognize your need, specifically that your sin has left you in great need of God's grace. Second, you must come to trust that it is only in Christ, in his death on the cross, that forgiveness can be found. Third, you must desire to place your whole life in his hands as his disciple, letting him, by grace, teach you how to live life as he would live life if we were in your shoes. We come as sinners. We have nothing to offer Jesus but our broken selves. But we offer what we have, and trust that he will take what we offer and make of it something beautiful.

*Question: Are those also to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?*

***Answer: No, for then the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation. Therefore, according to the command of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they amend their lives.***

Why would you eat if you were not hungry? Why would you eat food if you did not believe it would nourish you? If you don't recognize your sin and need for grace, and aren't willing yet to place your trust in Christ as Lord and Savior, it makes no sense to come to his table. Worse, as Paul points out later in his letter, those who do so, who share in the meal in an unworthy manner, "**eat and drink judgment on themselves.**"<sup>4</sup> To be clear, at Faith we don't act as gatekeepers at the table, stopping some people from coming, but we do try to make this clear, always reminding one another that it is not our sin that keeps us away, but our refusal to confess our sin and turn to Jesus for grace that keeps us at a distance.

All this takes us back to where we began. Tonight we remember. We remember that Jesus has given us a new commandment, a new mandate. We are to love as he has loved us. In this sacrament we see how Jesus has loved us to the fullest extent, his body broken and blood poured out that we might have mercy and life eternal. As we receive his invitation to come and share in this feast of grace, seeing our need and trusting him alone, we respond in love to the host of this feast. As we come

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<sup>4</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 11:29.

together, allowing our host to unite us as one body, we then respond in love to one another. There is great mystery here at this table, and always will be. Still, let us never underestimate what our crucified and risen Lord, by grace, will do in and through those who come and partake. And so know that you are invited to come now and share in this meal which Christ himself has prepared for those he loves.

Amen.