

February 7, 2021

*“Communion Sunday”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

1 Corinthians 11:23-29

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Well today is Super Bowl Sunday! And I think it's a bittersweet day for us fans here in New England. Because although the great quarterback, Tom Brady is playing in the Super Bowl, he's not doing it in a New England Patriot uniform. Now I think there are many people who are excited and want to see Tom Brady lead his new team, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, to a Super Bowl win. That would be number seven for him, as impossible as it is to believe. But I also think a large number of fans want to see him lose, feeling bitter that Brady betrayed his loyal followers here in New England by leaving in the first place. And in their bitterness, they think that not only should he not be forgiven for leaving New England, but as payback, they would like to see him lose the game. So we shall see what happens!

But drinking readily from the cup of bitterness is not just something unique to Patriot fans. It's one of all humanity's foibles as well. And, we all know that there are many, many more foibles, character flaws, bad habits, and sins we humans struggle with. That's why Communion Sunday is a good time for reflection, repentance and examination. After all, as St. Paul said today, “You should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup. For if you eat the bread or drink the cup without honoring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God’s judgment upon yourself.” Now Paul was specifically speaking to some flagrant abuses of Communion in the church at Corinth. But I think his words, “Examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup,” also has significant meaning for us today in the broader sense. Because you see, that gets to the heart of what Communion is all about. Let’s look at Communion a little more closely today.

Now even though John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, recommended that Communion be celebrated every Sunday, traditionally that hasn't happened in the Methodist church. The reason? It goes back to the days when there weren't enough Methodist ministers to serve the general population. Itinerant, circuit riding pastors on horseback could only get to the many congregations they served on an infrequent basis, like once a month or so. Not that I agree, but I guess the thinking is, why change now what's been a tradition for so long? And so, in general, the Methodist church celebrates the Sacrament of Communion only once a month, typically on the first Sunday of the month. But we are fortunate here in this church, because pre-Covid, and definitely after Covid, we offer two services. The one held here in the Sanctuary where Communion is served monthly, and the service held in the Chapel, where

Communion is served every week. And we have both options because I believe people love and need Communion. For through it, we are given a tangible and continuing sign of God's love for us. When we take the Communion elements in our hand, and put them in our mouth, we grasp the significance of the Bible verse, "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Taste and see that the Lord is good! Good, because God loves us so much that he sent his son as a sacrifice for us, to die for us! That is why it's so important for us to examine ourselves before taking Communion. Because honest self-examination in the light of that love, brings us to a place where we can't but admit to our foibles, our character flaws, our sins, and we realize our great need for God's forgiveness, and our need to change our ways. And Communion is the means by which we honor Christ's body, Christ's sacrifice – when we examine ourselves, when we take his body and blood into ours, and then when we go out and live in the light and love of Jesus Christ.

I recently read a true story that can serve as a metaphor about how communion should make us feel. A man contracted a mysterious illness that made everything he put into his mouth taste like liquid fire. For over three weeks he literally ate nothing. And when the illness suddenly abated, he decided to celebrate his new health by eating a simple orange. And here's what he said: "The taste of that orange flooded my mouth, and with it came a wave of gratefulness for all that had helped to produce this food and deliver it to my hands. The sun and the soil and the rain. The planters and harvesters and retailers. Even evolution itself, that slow-motion magic wand which had transformed a Jurassic seed into the ambrosia of the gods. And, of course Almighty God, the fount of all our blessings. I gave thanks for one and all."<sup>1</sup> And communion can do the same thing for us if we but open our hearts to its significance. The taste of the bread and the wine, the self-examination, the knowledge that we are forgiven, the giving of thanks to our Maker, the church as a whole, the fellowship and the sharing together of his body and blood: these things provide us a foundation as to what and who we are called to be today, and give us a promise of what is to come in the fullness of time.

I want to share with you one of the beautiful parallels in the Bible that puts an exclamation point on what communion signifies. It compares what happened in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, to an incident that happened immediately after Jesus resurrection, which I'll get to. In Genesis it says that God told Adam and Eve, "You may eat freely of every tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you shall die." And then the Bible goes on to say, "But

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<sup>1</sup> Gifts of the Spirit: Living the Wisdom of Great Religious Traditions, P Zaleski and P Kaufman

the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.' So when the woman saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too." And what happened? The eyes of both of them were opened... and they saw that they were naked and they knew that they had sinned. Now let's go to the Gospel of St. Luke, chapter 24. It describes the time the resurrected Jesus appeared to two people walking to the village of Emmaus. Cleopas was the name of one of them, but the Bible doesn't name the other. I like to think perhaps it was Cleopas' wife. So here is another husband and wife story. And what are they doing – they are walking the wrong way, they are leaving Jerusalem. Everything in the Bible points to Jerusalem and the cross, and yet they, like so many of us, are going in the opposite direction. And as they are walking, Jesus joins them, although Luke says, "they did not recognize who he was." But Jesus begins to interpret the Scriptures for them, beginning with Moses and then pointing out the purpose and meaning of his coming. And the very hearts within this couple begin to burn. So they invite Jesus into their home to have supper. When he was at the table with them, Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them. And what happened here? Immediately the eyes of both of them were opened, and they recognized him. Through Communion, Jesus was undoing with the bread, what Adam and Eve had done with the apple. Adam and Eve had their eyes opened and they realize they were naked and had sinned. But those two disciples at the table with Jesus, had their eyes were opened, and they saw the glory of Jesus Christ. Communion is given to us to undo the sins and shortcomings of humanity that began in the garden. And symbolically, those two disciples immediately got up and headed in the right direction, back to Jerusalem, to Jesus and the cross.

Communion. The Lord's Supper. The Table of the Lord. The bread and the wine. Through these names and symbols, we are given a tangible and continuing sign of God's love for us. And how do we then respond? The Rev. Peter Gomes tells this story: "Many years ago, I assisted as an extra pair of clerical hands at the Christmas Eve service in Boston's splendid Trinity Church. The crowd waiting to get into the church from Copley Square, on which the church fronts, was so great and so agitated that a detachment of mounted Boston police had to be dispatched for crowd control. The scene outside the church looked like a prelude to a rock concert, and inside there were wall-to-wall people. Not the usual Sunday worshipers, but a rather an odd collection of people waiting for something to happen. The church was beautifully decorated, the music incredibly grand, and the general effect, pregnant with

expectation. They sang the familiar carols with gusto, with the rest of the liturgy seemingly unfamiliar to most of them. Then they accepted the invitation to come to Holy Communion. By the hundreds they came. At the rail, after I had given the cup to one young man, through his tears he asked, ‘Now what happens?’” Now what happens?

Well, the answer really is, nothing... and everything! Nothing, because Communion is all about God. God's grace, God's forgiveness and love for us which knows no limits. And yet everything, because now we are changed. And our eyes are opened. And we respond by walking in the light of Jesus' light, knowing that we are sent to reflect that light. And so let us open our eyes and our hearts as we prepare to share in Holy Communion.