

Jeffrey A. Johnson
Peace Lutheran Church
Holbrook, Arizona
13th Sunday after Pentecost
August 19, 2018

TEXT: John 6: 51-58
Topical Sermon: Communion

We call it The Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, Sacrament. Today I want to talk with you about what we most commonly call Holy Communion.

There's a certain comfort in doing things without thinking about it, like...shaving or eating or even driving. We've done these things so many times we do them automatically—and that's good. If we had to think about every single thing we do, it would drive us nuts, and take too much time. Routine is good.

Sometimes, however, especially when it comes to things of faith, it's good to stop and think about what we do and why. Why do I say this? Well, remember the religiosity of Jesus' day. People, particularly the religious leaders, had been doing the same thing the same way for so long that they'd forgotten the reason behind what they were doing. And when we do that, something insidious happens. The form, rather than the substance, starts to take over. The way, the method, the very practice of a certain thing, e.g. the way we observe Sabbath, begins to trump the reason for the establishment of that something. Jesus battled this often and said, "*The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*" (Mark 2:27) The reason for the Sabbath got lost in the practice of the Sabbath.

You've heard me tell before the story of the woman who always cut off the end of her ham before putting it in the oven to bake. After many years of doing this, someone asked her, "Marge, why do you do that? Why do you cut off the end of your ham before baking it?" Marge thought for a moment and then said, "Because my mother always did." Never having thought much about it before, Marge then went to her mother and said, "Mother why did you always cut off the end of your ham before putting it in the oven?" The mother simply replied, "Because my

baking pan was too small.” Some things we do out of habit things without knowing why—and while that can be funny at time, at other times, that can get us into trouble.

Today I want us to stop and examine this matter of Holy Communion. I want us to understand 1) Why we practice Holy Communion? 2) What is going on during Holy Communion? 3) How others do it differently? and 4) Does it really make a difference?

Let’s begin with the first question: Why do we practice Holy Communion? Here’s the simple answer: Because Jesus said we should.

It all started on that night in the Upper Room in Jerusalem when Jesus was gathered with His disciples to celebrate the Passover just before He was arrested and crucified. You remember, don’t you? Da Vinci made it famous with this painting (show it) but it wouldn’t have looked much like this, with all the characters facing the camera, so to speak, and sitting at a table on chairs. No, the table would have been yay high (indicate with hands) and everyone would have been sitting around it on the floor, reclining with pillows. We’ve re-enacted this in our fellowship room on a few occasions on Maundy Thursday--but regardless, Jesus and His disciples would have been following the centuries-old custom of the Jewish Passover, remembering God’s miraculous delivery of their people from slavery in Egypt. There would have been bread and wine and other Passover foods present that night when Jesus did something different. Let’s read it together from Luke’s Gospel:

All read together: Luke 22: 14-20

See those words there in verse 19? *“Do this in remembrance of me.”* This is why we carry on this ritual, because Jesus commanded us to do it, in remembrance of Him.

The second question, “What is going on during Holy Communion?” is a bit more complicated. Let’s take a look at our worship bulletin, the bottom of page 5, to help us explain this.

_____, would you start to read what's written there in small print? I'm going to interrupt you along the way. (Have him/her begin.) Transubstantiation. Do you see the word "substance" hidden in the middle of that word? We're talking about Jesus' body and blood now, the substance of this sacrament, or holy act. Roman Catholics believe that when Jesus said, "This is my body" and "This is my blood," we are to understand that literally. Roman Catholics believe that when the priest utters the Words of Institution (what we just read from the scripture) the bread and wine become actually, chemically Jesus body and blood. A transformation takes place, hence the prefix "trans" before substance. This is why a little bell is rung at the point during the mass when the priest utters the Words of Institution. They believe that a transformation has just taken place, the bread and wine has just become Jesus' body and blood.

And this is why the Catholics are so very careful with how they handle these elements. For a long time, and still in some places, the wine was not given to the people—only the priest consumed it, on behalf of the people. You see, there was fear of spilling the wine—and what a sacrilege that would be! And this is why you may have seen in some Catholic churches a little plate, called a paten, being held under the mouth of those receiving the bread. They don't want the very body of Christ, or any portion of it, even a crumb, dropped. This is also why in some traditions a communicant will not even hold out his or her hands to receive the bread but, instead will stick out his or her tongue with the priest putting the bread right onto the tongue. It eliminates the possibility of dropping or crumbling the bread and desecrating the very body of Jesus. We may think all this concern about spilling the wine or crumbling the bread is silly—but please don't dishonor our Roman Catholic and Orthodox friends by thinking such. If you held to a transubstantiation view of what happens during Holy Communion, you might do the same. They are seeking to respect and honor what they believe to be truly Jesus' body and blood—after all, He said it was so.

_____, please continue reading. (Have him/her continue.) Stop. Those of you who have seen the *Luther* film or are familiar with his story may recall the scene in the cathedral when Luther, as a Roman Catholic monk, was presiding over his first communion. Do you remember how nervous he was? And, if you believe you were actually handling Jesus' body and blood, can you understand why he would have been so nervous? What did Luther do? (Solicit response.)

That's right: In his nervousness, his hand shook and he spilled the wine. Oh, my! I've often wondered if this experience led Luther to understand communion different, an understanding we now call "consubstantiation." The prefix "con" means with, in and under. The word "connect" is helpful here because it reminds us that, in the case of Holy Communion, Jesus' words are connecting the bread and wine with His body and blood. This view of communion is both similar to and different from the Roman Catholic view. It's similar in that we believe Jesus' body and blood are truly present in the bread and wine—we call it "Real Presence"—but it's different in that we believe the bread and wine remain bread and wine but are the means through which Jesus communicates Himself to us. I like to think of the consubstantiation view as like an extension cord. (Show one.) This cord, disconnected from the power source is just an extension cord but when you plug it into the power source, it carries electricity through it to your lamp or your organ or your computer. It is the means by which power is transmitted. Lutherans call Holy Communion (baptism too) a means of grace—a way by which Jesus communicates God's love to us. While we don't want to be careless with the bread and wine, we're not so concerned if some wine spills or a little bread crumbles; after all, it's not Jesus' body and blood, literally, but the means, the way, the extension cord through which Jesus communicates Himself. Can you see the distinction? Lutherans believe Jesus is truly present during communion but that the bread and wine remain bread and wine.

_____, go on, please. (Allow him/her to read.) Our friends, Bob and Betty here, come from the Anglican tradition which, in its more liberal form is called The Episcopal Church in the United States. These folks have a hard time landing on any particular definition of what happens during Holy Communion except to say they believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the sacrament. Some hold to a transubstantiation position—even to the ringing of the bell during the Words of Institution—but others hold to the consubstantiation position. What they can all agree on is that Jesus is truly present, forgiveness of sins is imparted during the rite and beyond that, it's a mystery. (Show slide.)

A last position to explain in answering the question, "What is going on during Holy Communion?" is a position held by most of our partner ministries here in Holbrook. I'm talking about the Baptists, the Assemblies of God, Calvary Chapel, St. John's and the Nazarenes. These

good folks believe that...well, _____, would you continue to read, please? (Allow him/her to do so.) Stop. It is a memorial. (Show slide.) I used to say, “It’s just a memorial service” but a former Baptist corrected me. She said, “When you use the word “just” you’re diminishing and trivializing its meaning. You shouldn’t do that,” she said, “because a memorial can be very powerful and very meaningful.” I stood corrected—and glad for it. These folks, while not taking “This is my body, this is my blood” literally, nonetheless take very seriously Jesus’ charge: “Do this in remembrance of me,” and they do, if paying attention, remember Jesus’ sacrificial love, most clearly shown on the cross, when they receive Holy Communion.

So...transubstantiation, consubstantiation, mystery or memorial? Which is it? Our Roman Catholic neighbors believe that if you don’t hold to the transubstantiation point of view, you should not come to the front to receive communion. Neither should their members commune in other churches, churches which don’t hold to the transubstantiation view. To do so, they believe, is desecrating Jesus Himself. Even if you don’t agree with this point of view, can you see why they think this way? It’s logical.

Some Lutherans, particularly Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod Lutherans (these distinctions are for another sermon), hold to what they call a “close communion” position. Many people mishear the word “close” and believe these folks practice “closed communion,” i.e. not allowing people other than those of their own tradition to communion. While that’s true, these good people are not trying to be separatist, they are not trying to deny God’s grace to others. No indeed. Folks who practice “close communion” believe that it’s critical to have a right understanding of what happens during communion otherwise the uninformed communicant is damning him or herself—and they don’t want that for anyone. We need to look at a passage of scripture here:

1 Corinthians 11:27-29. (Read it together)

Our Missouri and Wisconsin Synod Lutheran friends don’t want us condemning ourselves by coming to The Lord’s Supper casually or with some erroneous understanding of what is actually happening. Therefore, they practice “close communion,” communing only with others who hold

to the same understanding of communion as they do—those who are “close” to them doctrinally. Actually, “close communion” is what the Roman Catholics practice, too. Rather than look upon these positions as exclusive and shunning of others, I think it would behoove us to see these positions as loving. These folks don’t want to see others bringing judgment on themselves by receiving The Lord’s Supper inappropriately.

_____, would you finish reading that paragraph from our bulletin? (Allow for this.) As the statement says, we at Peace do not require a particular understanding of communion in order to receive The Lord’s Supper. We want you to know what our position is—and the consubstantiation position is one which I myself hold you, should you care to know—but we don’t require that everyone subscribe to our own particular position. We do ask that, if you come to the altar, you consider yourself to be a Christian—a Jesus-follower, and that you desire a closer union (hence the term “communion”) with God and that you believe Jesus’ words that somehow, through this rite, forgiveness of sins is granted. If you don’t believe these things, we ask that you remain, out of respect, in your seat.

And that brings us to the third question of the day: How do others do it differently? We’ve already talked about some of this, i.e. receiving the bread on your tongue rather than your hand, but there are vastly different practices amongst our various Christian traditions. I’m not going to try to be comprehensive here; I will only mention a few of the most obvious differences—and comment upon them.

The first concerns staying in your seat versus coming forward to receive communion. Ours is a tradition which asks communicants to come forward. I call this “the Lutheran altar call.” I see coming forth as an indication to God and to others in your faith family that you desire to reconnect with God, renewing your relationship and that you seek forgiveness. It’s a public display of your desire for God’s affection. Unless it’s hard for you to walk, like is the case with Hilda and Louise here, Lutherans see coming forward to the altar as a sign of your desire to recommit yourself to God—at least that’s what it should be if you are being thoughtful and intentional about what you’re doing, and not just doing it out of habit (which is a danger).

In many other Protestant churches, however, you remain in your seat. A plate of communion wafers and a tray of communion, not wine but grape juice, is passed down the row and when it comes before you, you have the option of taking or not. I respect the reason for this tradition, as well. Those who practice this method believe that communion is a very private thing between you and God and that when you're remembering of Jesus' sacrifice for you, it's best done while sitting and thinking, not standing up and moving forward like a herd of cattle. While I don't subscribe to this way of thinking, I understand it and appreciate it.

Another difference between churches concerns the elements themselves, the bread and the wine. I really like using bread, and unleavened bread like would have been used that night when Jesus instituted The Lord's Supper, but, for convenience sake, we, and many other churches, use wafers. These wafers (show one) are called "host" from the Latin *hostia*, meaning victim or sacrifice; you see the connection here, don't you? When Faryn Seal was here, she'd bake our unleavened communion bread each time—and I prefer that. Gretchen continued that practice for a while but then, well...we all get busy. If there's anyone here who would like to commit to baking real unleavened bread each time we commune, I'd welcome that. Please talk to me. Back to the differences: Some churches use little crackers—and really, does it matter? I think not. Martin Luther used the word "adiaphora" in talking about peripheral matters; not stuff that's really crucial.

Without meaning disrespect, it does make me smile when I see only grape juice being offered in most of our other evangelical congregations. Because of their fear of drunkenness, which has led to a strong teetotalism tradition, these churches only offer grape juice. I smile because they take the Bible literally in all other places but when it comes to wine, "Oh my goodness. We can't have that!" I even had a woman from one of these traditions tell me once that Jesus didn't turn the water into wine at the wedding at Cana. Oh, no! "Jesus wouldn't have encouraged drunkenness," she insisted. Of course, Jesus wouldn't have encouraged drunkenness but one can drink wine without going too far and getting drunk. Scripture does prohibit that. (Ephesians 5:18)

Here at Peace we offer both wine and grape juice because while we know that Jesus used real wine at the Passover we also want to be sensitive to those who struggle with alcoholism, or simply don't like the taste of wine, and prefer grape juice. This too, as Luther said, is "adiaphora," some peripheral—not crucial.

Some of you grew up not receiving communion until you professed your faith in Christ at your Confirmation, sometime in Middle School. That had been the tradition in many Lutheran churches and is still the practice in some today. The thinking here is that you should have some understanding of what you're doing in order not to bringing judgement on yourself—that part of scripture we already read from 1 Corinthians. I can see that but if you believe in infant baptism—God's grace coming to you when you're too little to understand any of it—how is that different from communing children who are too young to understand what's going on? Grace is grace, God's love coming to us whether or not we deserve it or understand it. That's how I see you. You can disagree with me, if you'd like.

The only time I ever denied communion to anyone was a teenaged girl who came to the communion rail giggling and texting. I saw her as clearly not caring about what was going on—and to give her communion would have been, in my opinion, denigrating what Jesus did on the cross for us. There needs to be respect for the sacrament, that something holy is happening—even if we don't fully understand it or understand it the same way.

Which brings me to one final difference in how we go about receiving communion. Many of us have been taught that we should be reverent when we receive communion—and appropriately so. So we come to communion with head bowed and with somber music being played. This is fine but...there's also a joyful side to this holy act. The term "eucharist," in Greek, means thanksgiving—and so it's also appropriate that we come to the communion table with a glad heart and a smile on our face with celebrative music being sung or played. And why is that? Because Jesus has paid the price for our sin, because we are forgiven, because God still loves us. Shouldn't that be demonstrated also? It's called a "Eucharistic celebration," a joyful response to what God, in Jesus, has done for us. I don't believe that teenaged girl to whom I denied communion, was texting her love for Jesus to her friend, but I believe it's just fine—to be

encouraged even, to walk away from the communion rail with a smile on your face, joy in your heart and a spring in your step. We've reconnected with God by receiving His grace.

I think we've, perhaps, already addressed my last question: Does it make a difference? Does how we understand and practice Holy Communion make a difference? Yes, absolutely it does—at least in understanding that something special is going on here, that's God is outreaching to us, once again, wanting to restore broken relationships and wanting to remind us of His amazing grace. Yes, that absolutely matters!

But no, at least from my perspective, a lot of the other things don't matter: Whether we come forward or sit in our seats, whether we use wine or grape juice, whether we commune weekly or monthly or quarterly. I agree with Luther: a lot of these things are adiaphora, non-critical.

So, today—and whenever communion is offered--I hope you won't just participate because, well, it's the first or third Sunday of the month and that's what we do here at Peace. Rather, regardless of the view you hold concerning what is actually going on here, I hope you'll participate intentionally, thinking about what God, in Jesus, has done for you and how you might respond to that love. We call it a sacrament: a holy act. And it's not what we do but what God has done: and He invites us to remember, receive—and rejoice! Amen.

Songs:

Opening	“United At The Table” (ELW#498)
After O.T. Lesson	“We Eat The Bread Of Teaching” (ELW#518)
Sermon	“O Bread Of Life From Heaven” (ELW#480)
Special	“In Remembrance” (Courtney)
Communion	“I Am The Bread Of Life” (ELW#485) “Eat This Bread” (ELW#472) “Come To The Table” (ELW#481)
Closing	“Sent Forth By God's Blessing” (ELW#547)