

“THE HOLY MYSTERY”
(1 Corinthians 11:23-26)
[HOLY COMMUNION SUNDAY]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 3-9-08]

-I-

1. Read Text 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 and Pray.
2. **[POINT TO COMMUNION ELEMENTS...]** About 12 times every year, our church has this table set like this with bread and juice for something we Christians call by different names: the Eucharist; The Lord’s Supper; or ...Holy Communion.

A–But even though its something we experience on a regular basis, too often I’ve found that we as God’s church merely go through the motions of its rites and rituals, and don’t really know what it is or what it means. ¹

B–In today’s scripture that we just read, we get the distinct impression that the Christians in Corinth have the same problem – they’ve either forgotten or misunderstood the meaning and practice of this experience.

C–So to set them straight, in Verse 26 the apostle Paul writes these words to remind them of that meaning,...

[NRSV]...“*For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again.*”

[MSG]...“*Every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this mean again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt.*”

3. So here I believe we find a description which hints at three words ² which I think summarize one biblical understanding ³ to what I’m calling “*The Holy Mystery*” of Holy Communion.⁴ – & it’s this meaning that I want us to explore together today (See bulletin “Sermon Notes”).

-II-

4. **First** of all, Holy Communion is a **PARTICIPATION in the past life and death of Jesus.**

A–It ***reminds*** us of Christ’s life and teachings here on earth -- of his actions and his words – that he came to “comfort the afflicted” and “afflict the comfortable”;

1–More specifically, it reminds us of the last meal that Jesus shared with his disciples in the Upper Room, and of all the odd people *included* at his table:

2–Just think for a moment of who was there at that Last Supper: a tax collector; some poor fishermen; at least one traitor; one who later denied Jesus; and others who would scatter at his death.

3–In other words, this wasn't a perfect group; it was a group that had its own individual quirks, and which very often didn't get along with each other – but Jesus included them all, anyway.

4–Holy Communion also reminds us of Christ's Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for us – in Paul's words in Verse 26, [NRSV] “*we proclaim his death.*” [or MSG] “*we reenact in our words and actions the death of the Master.*”

B–And yet, in Holy Communion we're not only *reminded* of these past events, but we actually *participate* in them, as well.

1–That means that the love and grace and forgiveness of God offered at the *first* Lord's Supper is not only available to us today, but is something we must *pass on*.

2–So just as Christ included all types of people at *his* table, so we do the same today.

3–That's why Communion in a Methodist church is *not* only just for Methodists, or members of our local church, or only for those adults/youth who've been through a Confirmation class, or even only for those who're already professing Christians.

4–No, in this understanding, biblical Communion is a meal open to everyone and anyone who is seeking God, and who seeks to live in a way that honors Him.⁵

4. The **second** word that we can use to describe this experience is **PRESENCE** – through Holy Communion, **we celebrate the PRESENCE of Christ with us here today.**

A–That's the meaning of Verse 26 that says “[NRSV]...*as often as [MSG: .every time] you eat this meal and drink this cup...*”

B–Now, unlike what we find in some Christian traditions,⁶ when we Methodists celebrate Holy Communion, we're not simply recalling some historical event from the past (like the crucifixion) – we're actually *experiencing it afresh today*;

1–Now, by that I *don't* mean that Christ is actually sacrificed again,⁷ but it *does* mean that we ourselves can experience the power and effects of Jesus' *past* sacrifice in our *own* lives *today*.

2–Now, we may be *physically* eating bread and drinking grape juice, but *spiritually* Christ is present around us through the Holy Spirit and the lives of God's people.

3–That's why we say that *Jesus* is the host of this meal – *not* the pastor or the church – No. *Christ* invites us to his table.

C–I've often heard it said that Holy Communion is “*where we meet God face-to-face.*”

1–And if that’s true, then that explains why so many people throughout history have actually *become Christians* at the Communion table. ⁸

2–And if in Holy Communion we “*meet God face to face*,” then that means that it can also be a source of great spiritual strength and renewal for those who *already possess faith*, as well. ⁹

5. The final word that I want to use to describe Holy Communion is **PROMISE** – in Holy Communion, we experience **a PROMISE (a foretaste) of the future here in the present.**

A–At the end of Verse 26, Paul says that we’re to practice this event [NRSV] “...until Jesus comes (again) / [MSG] “...until the Master returns.”

B–Well, I’ve heard Holy Communion called “*a place where time and infinity meet*”¹⁰ – that’s a great description, because it reminds us that this experience is a promise of the glory of Heaven still to come for each one of us.

C–But it’s also a promise of the unity that God’s people share here and will share in Heaven.

1–Black, white, yellow, red – rich, poor – liberal, conservative – young, old – contemporary, traditional – people we like and agree with, and people we don’t – all are equally invited to share at this table (just like at Christ’s Last Supper).

2–And what’s more is that we also share this experience mysteriously with those we call the “*Communion of Saints*” – those who’ve on gone ahead of us to heaven – they’re here even now as we prepare to dine at this table! ¹¹

D–One way of saying all of this is that Holy Communion is a foretaste of the heavenly Feast/Banquet in which we’ll all share one day as Christians.

1–It’s a taste of the “great supper” Jesus speaks of in *Luke 14* where many are invited, but few respond, the party given by the father in *Luke 15* after the return of his prodigal son (& of parties given by Woman who found lost coin & Shepherd who found lost sheep), and the “Marriage Supper of the Lamb” found in *Revelation 19*.

2–It’s a *party*, you see! I know that we don’t often think of it in this way, but that’s what it is: *God’s Party*... given for us here *today* as a promise of the great party that awaits us in the *future* in heaven! ¹²

–IV–

6. Participation. Presence. Promise.

A—Three words to describe how Holy Communion helps us experience the past, present, and future work of Christ in our midst:

- 1—...we **PARTICIPATE** in Christ's *past* life and death;
- 2—...we celebrate Christ's **PRESENCE** with us in the *present*;
- 3—...and we experience Christ's **PROMISE** of the *future* yet to come.

B—Today as we join together around this table, I (with Paul) invite us all to experience “*The Holy Mystery*” of the risen Jesus as we dine together at this holy meal.

7. Let's begin by giving thanks for what God has given to us...[Prayer of Great Thanksgiving]
8. [HOLY COMMUNION...]
9. [CLOSING HYMN: #617 – “I Come With Joy”]

ENDNOTES:

1. It is interesting that we too often make Holy Communion into something we celebrate “by rote,” because both in the early church and in early Methodism (in England in the 18th century and America in the 19th century), services of Holy Communion were times of great religious excitement and zeal.

In early Methodism, for example, worship spaces were often packed with people hungry for a touch from God, for spiritual direction – some long-time Christians needing renewal and other curious onlookers (brought by their friends) who will give their lives to Jesus Christ that day for the first time – so many people, in fact, that the crowd spills outside the building!

In addition to early Methodism, the early Christian church, in fact, centered its weekly worship not around preaching, or singing, or even praying, but around the celebration of the Lord's Supper – it was the main reason they gathered. How sad, then, that for all the joy and excitement Holy Communion brought to people in the past, we've somehow allowed it today to become some dull, boring ritual that we have to “endure” – instead of being a true “celebration,” we've made it into a funeral. We need to once again discover what it was about Holy Communion that made it so special to Christians in the past – that actually caused Christians to be *excited* about receiving it – so that we can rediscover how it can become a joyful thing once again for us today.

2. These three words remind us that in essence, Paul says that in Holy Communion, we're being reminded of what Jesus did for us in the *past*, and celebrating his presence with us in the *present* and into the *future*, as well – “*as often as you eat... and drink...*” = the present; “*we proclaim the Lord's death...*” = the past; “*until he comes again*” = the future.

3. Notice I said that this is ONE biblical approach to understanding Holy Communion – *not* the *one and only* way. There are, in fact, a variety of ways to view Holy Communion, and no one of them is any more “valid” or “biblical” than another. So regardless of what you've been taught about this previously, today I want to encourage and challenge us all to keep an open heart and an open mind to hear what other deeply committed, born-again Christians have believed about this Sacrament for the last 2000 years.

4. We often refer to it as a “Sacrament,” which can be thought of as a “sacred moment” in worship that connects *God's* story with our *own*, and links God's divine *answers* to our own human *needs*. Through their use in worship, the Sacraments communicate the very heart of the Christian message of salvation to us. Although Roman Catholic churches recognize seven biblical Sacraments, Protestant churches (like Methodism) acknowledge only two: Baptism; and Holy Communion/The Lord's Supper.

5. In the Holy Communion ritual found in our United Methodist Hymnal, this has traditionally been worded, “*Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another*” (UMH “Service of Word and Table I”). This means that children, visitors, non-Methodists, and even those who’re not yet professing Christians are invited to receive Holy Communion in a Methodist church.

In addition, occasionally today we’ll hear some Christians say, “*I don’t come to Communion because I don’t feel worthy.*” The problem with this thinking is that THAT is the whole point of Holy Communion! *None of us* is worthy by our own doings! But that’s the *very reason WHY* Jesus died for us -- because we’re *not* worthy! Yet, the good news of Communion is that Christ invites us to his table *anyway* (Read Romans 5:8)! Consider those first disciples: were any of them actually “worthy” in and of themselves? Most certainly not! Yet, Jesus even included a traitor at HIS table. By its very nature, then, Communion is designed to be a “meal for unworthy” people, because it reminds us that even when we feel “unworthy” it’s OK, because that simply highlights the great love and forgiveness and grace of God even more. This is also why our Methodist Communion ritual in the hymnal contains something called the “Great Thanksgiving” -- a way for us to say thanks to God for giving us Jesus, even when we were *not* worthy!

6. Such as the Baptist and many Pentecostal and non-denominational church traditions.

7. This is NOT the doctrine of “transubstantiation” that is a fundamental part of understanding the Eucharist in the Roman Catholic Christian tradition.

8. This was especially true in early Methodism in both England and America in the 18th and 19th-century. Of course, we may not think that this happens very much today. But that’s mainly because we pastors have neglected to teach that it *can* happen!

9. In theological terms, it has been called both a “*converting ordinance*” (one that brings us to salvation for the *first time*), and a “*confirming ordinance*” (one that helps us grow in our faith and walk with God *after* we’re born again). This “confirming” role means, for example, that if we’re looking for God to give us *peace of mind*, we can find it at Holy Communion. If we’re looking for God to give us *strength and encouragement*, we can find it at Holy Communion. If we’re looking for God to give us *direction and guidance*, we can find it at Holy Communion, because in it, we celebrate the *presence* of Christ with us today.

10. This phrase was actually suggested to me by a student studying to go into the ministry after I had taught a session on the biblical and Wesleyan understanding of Holy Communion at Emory University’s “Course of Study” School.

11. So when we come forward to receive the elements, I invite us to look around the sanctuary with our spiritual eyes. If we look carefully, we’ll see not only the people physically in this room at this time, but we may just catch a glimpse of part of host of heaven who have worshiped and found Christ here at our church in the past filling the sanctuary today (Read Revelation 7:9-10; Jude 1:14; Matthew 27:52; Revelation 18:24; and Hebrews 12:22-23).

12. Perhaps that’s why the early Christians and early Methodists were so excited about being at it – why they flocked to it so much – they didn’t want to miss out on a good party!