

Sacred Ceremonies: The Lord's Supper

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Welcome Time: A daughter asked her mother why she cut off the ends of the ham when baking it. The mother replied, "I don't know. I just always have. It's the way I learned it from my mother." Now the daughter asked, "Well, why did your mother do it?" This mom didn't know why her mom had. So she called her right then and there, and asked. The mom's mom, the grandmother, explained, "My baking pan was small and to make the ham fit, I had to cut off the ends."

There are times when we end up doing things without knowing the meaning behind what we're doing. This even happens with religious things, and so we are taking some time in January to go through some of our sacred ceremonies given to us in the Bible.

Confession: There is a discussion in the Bible how there is first Adam (of Adam and Eve) who brought death, and a second Adam (Jesus), who brought life. The first Adam ate the fruit of death, but the second Adam gave us the bread of life. The antidote to having eaten the fruit of sin and death...have you eaten of the fruit of sin and death? ... is to take in the bread of life. That's what we do in this moment, we go to him who is the bread of life.

Assur: When Jesus fed the 5,000, there were twelve baskets full of leftovers. So, in this moment of coming to the bread of life, know that he has forgiven you, and then some! In Jesus Christ we have overcoming life.

Sermon Time: I saw a friend recently, and we laughed (again) about a meal we had with our wives 35 years ago. We were young and sat down in a nice place where the menus had no prices on them. He and I excused ourselves to the rest room where we discussed whether we should leave or show ourselves commoners by asking what the prices were or what. That we were so uninitiated made us laugh in the bathroom and made us laugh 35 years later.

There are all sorts of meals with all sorts of memories. I've eaten a few spoons of oatmeal after fasting in a wilderness setting. I've eaten an egg that a very poor person carried twelve miles to give me. I've had peanut butter sandwiches in the school cafeteria. And I'm sure you have had much the same. But none of these would we really consider to be ceremonial meals. There is one, however, that does. There are various names for it, each emphasizing an aspect of the meal's meaning. But whether we call it *the Lord's Supper* or *Communion* or the Eucharist (a Greek word for "thanks"), there is this one ceremonial meal we do celebrate.

Unlike with last week, when we talked about weddings and would think with it of as a wedding feast, this ceremonial meal does not happen once. There is one meal and it happens more than once.

Remember the old coot who told the marriage counselor regarding his wife, "Tell her I love her? I told her that on our wedding day!"? Well, tell her more than that. Tell her more. In this meal, we are not told something once and for all, but we are told more. Whether we come forward to it, or it is brought back to us, we are told something in this ceremonial meal again and again.

Let's look at what we are told by first considering the Biblical roots of the meal. Then, second, the church's definitions of the meal. Then, third, ways to handle the meal. Finally, fourth, one thing to always remember in the meal.

Let's pray.

First, the biblical roots of the meal. We have a bridge passage in our text today. The whole chapter begins with the feeding of the 5,000, and ends with a discussion about Jesus and manna. Manna is the bread provided by heaven in the story of the Jews deliverance from Egypt, and the meal about all of that is the Passover Meal.

John 6 and the Passover story have some similar building blocks. The Passover recalls Jews released from Egypt and passing through the Red Sea. It is on the other side in the wilderness that they get the bread that sustains them. John 6 has a wilderness, a crossing of water, and a sustaining with bread as well.

Jesus here explains he is the new and better manna that must be eaten, that he is the bread of heaven given to sustain. And in his last Passover meal with his disciples, he explains with audacity that this basic, core identity ceremonial meal is to henceforth regularly be celebrated by his followers *with his dying for them their basic thought*.

I'm not sure we fathom the hugeness of what Jesus did. Let's see if I can help us. Christmas is about Christ plain and simple. It is one of the two biggest celebrations we have. It is vital and connected to our central beliefs; Jesus was God who lived among us. Now, from today on I want all of you to celebrate Christmas with me, Jeff Wood,

in mind. Hold pictures of me in your hands. Sing songs about me with your choirs. Have special bulletin covers about me for the day. What would you think?

But that's what Jesus did. For a millennium plus, Jews had celebrated a meal reflecting on God and his saving act, and Jesus says, "No more. From now on think of me."

May I step aside from the main flow of the sermon for a moment to point out that most people in America think of Jesus as nice, that he didn't teach that he was God, and that later followers just embellished all that. Hey, Jesus did say, "You've thought about God for a thousand years with this meal, but now I want you to think about me." There are only three reactions to someone like that. One, you run from them. "You're scaring me." Two, you shut them down. "You're a crazy dude." Three, you worship them. "You are who you say you are, and I follow you." But no one says, "You're nice," and then just goes on with their life as usual.

Ok, bottom line, at the roots of this meal are the words "deliverance" and "sustaining" worked by Jesus in the Exodus, and now worked by Jesus in his person, giving his life for us. Do you know *you* have been delivered? That *you* can be fed and fueled for eternal living by Jesus?¹

¹ Just as an aside here. One way of talking about deliverance is now having peace with God. If the meal has to do with the peace God has made for us with him through Jesus and the peace he has made for us with each other, then for us to come with grudges in our heart and with no intention of being reconciled or being peacemakers, then we are out of flavor with the meal.

Second, the church's definitions of the meal. I was going to say the theological definitions of the meal, but then I thought that few but pastors are interested in theology. So I've said the church's definitions of the meal. There may not be that much interest in that either, but definitions are helpful. So here we go.

The Lord's Supper is a *sacrament*. This is the Latin word for oath. Raise your right hand. Go on. It's an oath just like you feel you're about to do now. It is what a soldier pledged regarding obeying his commander, and not deserting the battle standards.

A good definition of sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace. Say that with me. A wedding ring is an outward and visible sign of something intangible; love. There's an affection and loyalty felt ... inward and invisible, and the ring is outward and visible.²

Roman Catholics understand that there are other practices which God uses with powerful effect upon us, and they have called several of these *sacraments*. Protestants, however, say that what Jesus prescribed in the Bible were only these two – baptism and the Lord's Supper -- so let's just keep it to that.

Sometimes the sacraments are referred to as *means of grace*. For me to travel home today, I will go by car on a road. The car and road are *means* to me

² The outward and visible doesn't make sense if there is no inner substance. However, there are times when a ring, for example, reminds and encourages love when it ebbs low. As we will talk about in a few paragraphs, it represents but also presents.

getting home. For me to bake a cake at home today, I will use a pan and an oven. The pan and oven are instruments for baking the cake. So God uses means and instruments to convey his grace (get it to us, bring it to fruition in us) and that is what sacraments are.

I like the words represent and present. When we take antibiotics, it represents an enormous effort and breakthrough by scientists for our health. You hold the pills, and it means that. It represents that. But as you take the pills, it presents that science to your body and brings health. If you just held the bottle and thought about the breakthrough, that wouldn't be good enough. If you took the pills, and there hadn't ever really been a scientific breakthrough, that wouldn't be good. The meals represents and presents the grace of God to us for our spiritual well-being. Are you seeing and receiving the grace of God?

Okay, enough of definitions. Third, ways to handle the meal. Handle. Touch. See. Taste. A picture is worth a thousand words, and the message of life we get is not just an audible one for our ears and mind, but one we can handle and bring into our bodies. We have visual learners and tactile learners. We have those who learn by doing. This is for all of us. You don't have to be able to read. You just have to be able to open your mouth. So, note that we handle, see, taste, smell, ... the meal, and that conveys this Christ is for our whole and simple and real selves.

You know what else it conveys? Can we live without food or drink? No. We are not talking about

anything very complicated or rarified. This is simple food, simply at hand, for simple people; thank God. But do we generate this simple food within our own bodies? No. We live only in dependence on bringing food and drink from outside of us into us. This is a spiritual truth. We were made to live by bringing something, someone from outside of us, into us.³ Have you sought and found the simple Jesus, and brought his saving life into you?

The biblical roots of the meal. The church's definitions of the meal. Ways to handle the meal. One thing to remember in the meal.

A nationwide poll was done some number of years ago in which people were asked what word or phrase spoken to them in a truly sincere way is most meaningful. Can you guess the answer? "I love you." How about the second most desired utterance? "You are forgiven." Third? This is a surprise to me, but I get it. "Supper's ready." In this meal, all three messages are wrapped together – God says, "I love you." God says, "I forgive you." God says, you have a place at my table and you will have fellowship in my family, and you will be provided for --- "Supper's ready." And, unlike the old coot in the marriage counselor's office, he says it again and again.

But that's not the one thing I want you to remember. A sacrament is an oath. The soldier pledges

³ We cannot make ourselves, sustain ourselves, or save ourselves. It comes from the outside. We don't ourselves think up a religion (inside out) but we have a faith revealed to us by another (outside in).

to not abandon the battle standards and to be loyal. Are you thinking that I am wanting you to remember that this is your pledge to God, soldiers of the cross? No, that's not it at all. I want you to remember that this meal is God's pledge to you. It is his pledge to you. He pledges to love you and to love you and to love you. Look into that meal. Look into that cross. God is looking at you, at you ... and pledging to be your faithful and loving God. Here is his token of his pledge ... bread and wine. Here is his promise. Here is his commitment. I love you. I forgive you. I will sit with you as my bride in the wedding banquet of the lamb.

Do you see God looking at you, yes you, in this meal? Looking at you, yes you, taking an oath to you? See him, see him pledging his life to you.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

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