

# October 25

## Lesson 8

### One With Christ and One Another

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**Focal Passage:** Luke 22:14-20

**Background Text:** Luke 22:7-20; Matthew 26:26-30

**Purpose Statement:** To claim the sacrament of Communion as an indispensable means of grace that blesses us on multiple levels

#### Luke 22:14-20

<sup>14</sup>When the time came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles joined him. <sup>15</sup>He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. <sup>16</sup>I tell you, I won't eat it until it is fulfilled in God's kingdom." <sup>17</sup>After taking a cup and giving thanks, he said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. <sup>18</sup>I tell you that from now on I won't drink from the fruit of the vine until God's kingdom has come." <sup>19</sup>After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." <sup>20</sup>In the same way, he took the cup after the meal and said, "This cup is the new covenant by my blood, which is poured out for you."

**Key Verse:** "In the same way, he took the cup after the meal and said, 'This cup is the new covenant by my blood, which is poured out for you' " (Luke 22:20).

Who would have thought that Hollywood had something to teach us about the sacrament of Communion? The 1984 movie *Places in the Heart* ends with a scene of the Lord's Supper in a Baptist church. This scene visually captures the significance of the act.<sup>1</sup> In the movie, Sally Field plays a woman whose husband served as the sheriff in the town of Waxahachie, Texas, until he was accidentally killed by an African American youth.

The members of the congregation pass the elements to one another. (My Baptist sources tell me that is one way Baptists distribute the elements.) As the characters pass the elements to one another, the audience sees the reconciliation and even the promise of resurrection within the walls of the church.

A couple whose marriage had experienced infidelity take each other's hands. The unscrupulous banker who wanted to foreclose on a farm receives the elements. Moze, played by Danny Glover, sits in the pew, healed of the wounds he received earlier in the movie.

Most startlingly, the dead sheriff receives the elements from his wife's hand. He passes them to the young black man who had inadvertently shot him and had been brutally killed just after the accident.

The movie does not explain what is happening, even why two dead men are sitting in the church. The movie suggests important meanings in the sacrament of Communion (the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper). The reconciliation of the couple, Moze's healing, and the sheriff's and the young man's restoration to life all contribute to a fuller understanding of the sacrament of Communion.

#### Identity

In previous lessons, we have explored significant events that formed the

identity of the people of Israel and, by extension, the church. In this lesson, we look at how Jesus created a new covenant at the Last Supper with the disciples. Although this new covenant helps us form our identity as a community, it does not negate the old covenants with contemporary members of the Jewish faith or with the church.

The covenants of the Hebrew Bible still help us to understand ourselves. Even though we disagree with members of the contemporary Jewish faith about the identity of Jesus, we still take our place alongside them as the people of God who bear witness to the grace and power of God.

The Last Supper took place within the context of the Passover, one of the events that helped Israel understand its identity and call. The Passover reoriented the people's relationship to time: "This month will be the first month; it will be the first month of the year for you," the Lord told Aaron and Moses (Exodus 12:2).

The Passover called for unity and sharing among the people (Exodus 12:4), remembering the vulnerable and those who did not have enough. It was intended to call to mind God's actions that created the relationship and gave Israel its identity and mission (Exodus 12:17).

By giving the bread and the cup, Jesus established a covenant with his disciples and, by extension, the church. This covenant binds Jesus to the church in a commitment. This covenant binds Christians to one another.

In a sad irony, the sacrament of Communion was intended to provide a sense of solidarity to the church, but it has created confusion and division throughout the history of the universal church. Leaders in the worldwide church disagree about who can serve the elements, how they should be distributed, and who can receive them. We have to settle, for the time being, on celebrating the sense of unity and fellowship within each congregation (or at denominational meetings) that we experience during the sacrament.

The United Methodist Church has agreements with other denominations in which we recognize their orders and will celebrate the sacrament with one another. We might note that, at least in Luke's account, the first experience of the Lord's Supper led to an argument (Luke 22:23-24).

We can see in the passage and in the Communion liturgy in *The United Methodist Hymnal* that the sacrament of Communion brings together the past, the present, and the future. We remember the past, celebrate the present, and anticipate the future.

***How does the sacrament of Communion help you realize your identity in Christ?***

## Past

In Luke's account, the Supper takes place at the time of the Passover. As noted above, the Passover recalled the events of the Exodus from Egypt and the formation of the community. The Supper was tied to God's past actions on behalf of the people of Israel.

The prayer of The Great Thanksgiving in the Communion liturgies in the *Hymnal* puts much emphasis on God's acts to form the church.<sup>2</sup> The prayer highlights the act of Creation ("You formed us in your image"); forgiveness ("When we turned away, and our love failed, your love remained steadfast"); the ministry of the prophets ("spoke to us through your prophets"); and the ministry of Jesus (the section after "blessed is your son Jesus Christ").

These references to God's action in creation, the prophets, and Jesus give us the foundation of our faith. God has taken the initiative to act to create the community of the church to minister in the world.

***Which phrases from the Communion liturgy are most meaningful to you? Do you find that some phrases***

*Speak to you more profoundly at certain times than at other times?*

## Present

Jesus told the disciples that he "earnestly desired" to share the Passover meal with them (Luke 22:15). We must remember that Jesus shared the meal with Judas, who would betray him; Peter, who would deny him; and the other disciples, who would soon argue about who was the greatest (verse 24).

Jesus' statement reminds us of the fellowship we all share as imperfect people every time we celebrate the sacrament together. Divisions of class, economic strata, ethnicity, language, and gender should melt away in the sacrament of Communion. Any artificial distinctions between people become unimportant in the fellowship of the sacrament.

Paul sought to make the same point in his teaching to the Corinthians. He challenged the Christians there to see one another as equals in Christ, despite the social stratification of the Corinthian society (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). The rich members of the church enjoyed a big meal, while the poor went hungry. Paul saw the sacrament as an occasion in which we become family, build one another up, and make sure no one goes without.

As part of the present experience of the sacrament, we remember that the risen Christ comes among us. This understanding of the presence of Christ has caused much division within the universal church.

Theologians ask about the sense in which Christ is present and the exact meaning of the elements being the body and blood of Christ. United Methodists affirm the real presence of Christ but acknowledge that it is a mystery. We cannot fully explain how the bread and the juice are the body and the blood of Christ, but we rejoice in Christ's presence with us.

The Great Thanksgiving prayer teaches this unity and presence of the risen

Christ among us when it says, "By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world." It celebrates the presence of Christ in the elements at the point where the celebrant says, "Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ."<sup>3</sup> This part of the prayer, called the epiclesis, recognizes how God's actions through the words of the celebrant (an ordained elder or a licensed local pastor) fulfill Jesus' words that the bread and the juice are the body and the blood of Jesus.

*At what point during Communion do you feel closest to Christ? At what point do you realize your connection to those around you?*

## Future

During the meal, Jesus made puzzling statements about the bread, saying that he wouldn't "eat it until it is fulfilled in God's kingdom," and the wine, saying that he wouldn't "drink from the fruit of the vine until God's kingdom has come" (verses 16-17). Jesus had already described God's dominion as a meal in Luke 13:29.

In these words, Jesus pointed toward the future life in the resurrection. The sacrament anticipates the coming resurrection and kingdom/dominion of God. In the resurrection, we will experience healing, communion, and the full presence of the risen Christ. The sacrament keeps these promises before us.

The prayer of The Great Thanksgiving alludes to a meal when it says "until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet."<sup>4</sup> This victory is God's victory over sin and evil and all that resists God's will in creation. This is God's victory over sin within us so that we can claim the promise of Philippians 1:6: "The one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job."

***Can you think of a time when a Communion service made an impact on you? What were the circumstances?***

***How did the sacrament provide a spiritual experience for you? In what ways did the service help you recall the past acts of God, the present reality of God, or the anticipation of the resurrection?***

## **Divisions**

As we mentioned above, the sacrament of Communion causes much division and even confusion in the worldwide church. When I served as an intern at a psychiatric hospital during my seminary days, my supervisor and I served Communion once a month to the patients who made up our congregation.

One Sunday, as we distributed the elements, one of the patients began to cry. She refused to take the elements. In a conversation with her, my supervisor ascertained that she had heard of Paul's admonition in 1 Corinthians 11:27: "This is why those who eat the bread or drink the cup of the Lord inappropriately will be guilty of the Lord's body and blood."

Both the RSV and the KJV render the CEB's term "inappropriately" as "in an unworthy manner." I am not sure if she had decided this on her own or if a pastor/teacher had taught her that this verse meant that we could take Communion only if we are worthy of the sacrament. Paul, as we discussed above, intended this verse to challenge a church that treated the poor in a condescending way. Those actions constituted eating the bread and drinking the cup inappropriately. It was inappropriate because it did not build community.

Since my internship, I have encountered other people who have the same mistaken notion as the woman in the service. We can never do anything to deserve the grace God shows to us in the sacrament of Communion. Within the narrative itself, the disciples prove their own betrayal (Judas), cowardice (Peter), and

arrogance (apparently all of them in verse 24). The sacrament offers us the unmerited grace of God, through the body and the blood of Jesus the Christ.

As we have discussed, the church universal has created divisions over this sacrament (as well as the sacrament of baptism). Some churches exclude nonmembers of the denomination or the congregation from the sacrament. United Methodists believe in an open table, where all may partake. The table is Christ's table.

***Have you ever been to a church of another denomination or congregation and been denied the sacrament of Communion because you were not a member? How did that make you feel?***

## **Celebration**

I have no magic words or strategies that will help the church universal overcome our divisions over the sacrament that Jesus intended to create community and solidarity. We can rejoice in the fellowship we experience in our congregation, denomination, or affiliated denomination. That serves us for the present. We can anticipate the time when we will all share full fellowship with one another. That points us to the future.

As in the movie scene referenced at the beginning of this lesson, we can celebrate when divisions break down, when the sacrament brings healing, and when we receive assurance of resurrection. Because a gift from Jesus has often become a means of division, we will have to find our ways to rejoice, while we wait for the time when God cleans up the mess that has been made of the sacrament. For now, we celebrate the gift.

***In what ways can your church make Communion more of an act that breaks down barriers between people? What divisions exist in your congregation or Sunday school class? How can the sacrament of***

*Communion help to break down those divisions?*

We thank you for the grace that you show in the sacrament of Communion, O God. We thank you for forgiving our individual sins and for offering grace that can make us better people. We thank you for the grace that forgives the church for creating division where you wanted unity. Help us share the fellowship with persons of other denominations. Give us an earnest desire to experience the full fellowship that you have waiting for us in the resurrection; in the name of Jesus. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Baptists typically use the term *Lord's Supper* for the ordinance of Communion.

<sup>2</sup>*The United Methodist Hymnal*, page 9.

<sup>3</sup>*Hymnal*, 10.

<sup>4</sup>*Hymnal*, 10.