

Psalm 23
1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
July 2, 2023

Communion Basics

The Psalm

Psalm 23 has been called “A Feast of Grace.” It is the world’s favorite psalm. Like a good shepherd, the generous host provides the daily necessities of life: a table with food to eat, shelter, and safety. So gracious is the host that the psalmist’s “cup runneth over.” Listen to these familiar words of Psalm 23...

The Epistle Lesson

In our lesson today from his First Letter to the Church in Corinth, Paul reminds the people of the tradition that he had passed on to them regarding the meal that was shared in an upper room on the night of Jesus’ betrayal. It provided the basis for the church’s practice of the Lord’s Supper. Listen to these words from 1 Corinthians 11:23-26...

Sermon

It was July 20, 1969, eight years after President John F. Kennedy announced a national goal of landing a man on the moon by the end of the 1960’s. Hazel and I were at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, and I was about to begin my second of three years there. We went out to take a picture of the moon with our instamatic camera at the time of the first landing of man on the moon. And then we went back to our dorm apartment and made a picture on our black and white TV of Neil Armstrong’s “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” Hazel’s father gave us that TV for a wedding present a couple of years earlier. And we actually still have the stand that it sat on. It has wheels and now hold one of my tool chests.

It was not initially reported but revealed later—the devotional experience of astronaut Edwin E. “Buzz” Aldrin as Apollo 11 arrived on the surface of the moon. Naturally, the world was preoccupied with the excitement of that momentous event, and little was thought of the fact that Aldrin requested air-to-ground silence for a brief time. But in that short time of silence, Aldrin placed before him, on a table space in front of the Abort Guidance System computer, some communion elements that he had brought along from earth. There was also a Bible from which he read. And in the silence of space, in that vast largely unknown environment, he sat at the table and broke bread and drank from the communion cup. Following that observance, he stepped from the spacecraft to plant his footsteps on the moon. It was not the way the Book of Order authorizes the Holy Sacrament, but a space voyager sat and partook of the Lord’s Supper.

What does it mean for us to celebrate communion? A sacrament that goes all the way back to New Testament times and yet is the experience of an astronaut?

To sit at the Lord’s table means to accept God’s hospitality. He is the host and we are the guests. He invites us to come. And as we accept his invitation, we come to the table. This table wasn’t built with saw and chisel and wood, nearly so much as it was built with the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This is not our table; it is his.

Of course, the table that the psalmist referred to in the 23rd Psalm was not the communion table. But there are distinct similarities. We know that the psalmist understood the hospitality of the Lord in providing a table for us. “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” (v. 5) That even in the midst of enemies, God prepares a table before us. Who—or what—are our enemies today? Russia, China, Iran, North Korea. But they also include sickness, suffering, and loss. We recall that as Jesus prepared and conducted the Last Supper at the table in that upper room with his disciples, there were enemies about. In fact, that very night he would

be betrayed into their hands. Suffering and death on a cross were at hand. But Jesus knew a presence in that communion experience that provided him strength during the dark days that were ahead. It was as if God gave him something that even the enemies of hatred and death could not quench. It was as if God provided him food that would satisfy his real hunger. It was as though God provided him drink that his thirst could not extinguish.

The Good Shepherd was indeed caring for his Lamb. And though they might slay the Lamb, they could not bind him to death. In him was light and darkness could not overcome it. The Lamb that they slew has become our Lord and Christ forever and forever.

God's love for people in the person of Jesus Christ through incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension, is the most astounding thing that has ever happened. It surpasses by far man's journey to the moon. It, more than anything else, calls forth our response of faith, hope, love, and commitment.

There are three communion basics that we can consider as we sit at table this morning. What might be called the Three R's of Communion. No, they're not the 3R's of learning: Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmetic. They are Redemption, Relationship, and Responsibility.

The first is that this table means *redemption* by grace. We didn't earn our right to sit at this table. Rather, Jesus Christ has freely given us the right to sit here. And our unworthiness is through him, completely cancelled. At the heart of our redemption is the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. "While we were sinners, Christ died for us." (Rm. 5:8)

God puts away the things that separate us from him and from one another. He breaks down walls and barriers between people. Also, he breaks down that which separates us from our true selves, from the person he created us to be. He redeems us. He delivers us from the lords of this world that we might bow at the feet of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The elements of bread and wine are the symbol and sacrament of grace and of redemption. Therefore, as we come this morning to the Lord's table, we can experience the merging of two feelings: *humility* and *confidence*. No person who really understands what this table means can sit at it in pride and self-satisfaction. Rather we sit here in humility. But at the same time, no person who really understands can sit here in ultimate fear or complete despair. Along with humility we have confidence, not so much in ourselves, but in the God who calls us to the sacrament and to himself. Paul said, "I am assured that nothing can separate us from the love of God that we know in Jesus." (Rms 8:38) Communion conveys *redemption*.

A second thing that we note about our observance of the Lord's Supper is that communion means *relationship*—relationship based upon our redemption. Our right here is that of children. Rather than sitting as subjects at a table of royalty, we sit as family guests at the table of our heavenly Father. We gather here in the context of a family. In a family we have the freedom to be ourselves. So we can come to the table just as we are, without one plea. We come not feeling that we have to put on a mask. We are at home. We are loved. Christ opens his arms and says, "Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." Thus are we related to God in freedom and openness. We sit as equals and as members of God's family, related to one another. Communion means relationship.

Redemption. Relationship. And a third thing that this table signifies is *responsibility*. Surely it stood before Jesus that way that night. The word *sacrament* comes from the Latin *sacramentum*. And the sacramentum was an oath that the soldier in the Roman Empire took of loyalty and devotion and submission to the emperor. Jesus' loyalty was to the Father who sent him to save people on earth.

Well, this sacrament declares our sacramentum—our allegiance—first and foremost to God. And we don't simply receive the good news of Jesus Christ and keep it bottled up inside ourselves. We so and tell others by word and deed. We live it daily. We respond by ministering to our fellow man—agents of reconciliation. Thus our lives become a channel through which something of God's divine love can pass through into a needy, hungry world.

Redemption, relationship, and responsibility call for *manifestation*. We make known our experience of these three things by demonstrating them in the world. As we leave this morning after sharing communion, we go into the world to love because we have been freely loved. We reveal and make known Christ because he has revealed and made himself known to us and called us to live in his company here this morning and forever.

My friends, we're sitting at the Lord's table this morning. It is in the spirit of people who have been honored beyond all expectation that we come to this table. People who have come to know what it means to be a child of God. As we sit at his table, we can catch a glimpse of his radiance, of the light that has overcome the darkness. And that having seen this great light, we might bask in it, live in it, and go forth to reflect it in our daily lives. And that will truly be "one giant step for mankind."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.