

“Grace for the World”  
Galatians 3:23-29  
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Will you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

Today is one of my favorite days in the church year. Communion holds a special place in my heart, and each and every time I have the opportunity to participate in communion, I feel a renewed closeness to God.

I have had a long history of wanting to be a part of the church and yet feeling like I was kept from it in many ways. When I was a child I was not raised in a Christian home yet I longed for God. I went to church with whatever friend would take me. I found myself going to Catholic mass at Saint Bartholomew with my next-door neighbors, a family from Peru. I did this for well over a year and when it was time for them to take their first communion I was disheartened that I wasn't allowed to do that because I had not gone to the preparatory classes as they had and I had not been baptized. The priest was so wonderful, he baptized my baby doll and my friends mother held a celebration for all of us including a cake and I have pictures from my baby's baptism and inclusion in God's world. I know that this was the priest's way of saying that even though I personally could do this or was important that I knew that God loves me too. And yet... I was excluded.

Fast forward a few years and I had had multiple negative interactions in the church, one of which which led me to leave the church and turn my back on God for many years. One of the times I went to church after the worst of the terrible experiences, I was about 18 or 19 years old. It came time for communion and because I was not a member of that church I was told that I was not allowed to participate. I was excluded from the sacraments. I still didn't understand why it was so important just to be a member in order to be filled with God's love that they were proclaiming this mysterious bread and juice could provide. But once again I felt excluded. I felt as though I wasn't worthy of God's love, not worthy of being at his table.

Fast forward a few more years and I came here to worship. I'd been coming for a while but had not taken communion yet. Until the first Sunday of October. World communion Sunday. I took communion for the very first time sitting right up there in that balcony surrounded by my family and I felt filled with God's love. It was as if all of the years of my life prior to that moment had been leading up to the time and place that I was at now and God said I love you, Sarah. I still get emotional thinking about the first time I took communion and how that felt. So today for me to be able to be serving you communion, hopefully sharing with you the significance of this sacrament, I can't put into words how special it truly is to me.

The act of Communion is special because it recalls the act that Jesus led during the Last Supper. Jesus, a Jew, shared bread and wine with his friends, possibly as a Seder meal before Passover began (Some scholars say that the day of the meal may have been altered from the traditional Sabbath meal because Jesus knew it was to be his last supper with his disciples). Last week my daughter Maia and I saw the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* at the Murat. It was a wonderful musical, by the way. There is a scene that shows the family celebrating the meal before the sabbath and in it they hold up bread, break it, and share it. They then pass a cup of wine to share. It struck me how this was most likely how that Last Supper went as well - something that had been happening in Jewish homes for many, many years. That act of breaking bread and sharing wine has become a part of who we are as Christians, in that we use it to remind ourselves and each other that Christ was the sacrificial lamb, dying for us. The Jews, including Jesus and his disciples, likely would have been remembering the Passover story when God saved them in Egypt. So for Jesus to be the sacrificial lamb for us is in keeping with the message of Passover and God's love for his people.

A number of Bible stories help us understand Holy Communion. We most often turn to the accounts of Jesus' meal with his disciples in the upper room on the night he was betrayed (Matthew 26:17-30; Mark 14:12-26; and Luke 22:7-23). Each of these gospels records how Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to his disciples with the words: "This is my body." After the supper, he took a cup of wine, blessed it, and gave it to his disciples with the words: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28). As Paul recounts the origins of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, he reminds the church of the tradition he received from the Jesus and handed on to the church and to us. The stories recounting Jesus' words at the table in the upper room are called the institution narrative. They tell how Holy Communion was begun and recount Jesus' command that the church continue to celebrate this meal in his name for his remembrance.

Set in the context of a Passover meal, these stories about the Last Supper focus our attention on the relationship between the events of the Passover (Exodus 12:1-28) and Jesus' death on the cross. In the Exodus story, the blood of the lambs the Israelites use to mark their doorposts serves as a sign to God not to bring judgment upon their households. In the gospel stories of the Last Supper and crucifixion, Jesus' blood serves as the sign to God not to bring judgment upon the people for their sins.

In each of these stories we hear accounts of Jesus' presence with and care for the community of faith. In the story of the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus takes the place of the sacrificial lamb (Passover story) on behalf of our sins. We are reminded of the Exodus story in Jesus' teachings about the bread of life. Jesus' actions are joined to God's continuing care for the covenant community, providing sustenance even in the desert. In the feeding of the multitudes, the sharing of a meal is a sign of Jesus' compassion for those people who would follow him and listen to his teaching. In the post-resurrection accounts, Jesus continues to be present to the disciples and the community of faith with this care.

In the life of the early church recorded in Acts, the church remembers in its weekly gatherings the sacrifice, fellowship, and care that Jesus provided as he gathered around him people from all walks of life to share a meal.

As United Methodists, we understand Holy Communion to be a sacrament. Holy Communion (and baptism as well) is a means by which God encounters us, works in us, and sustains us in mercy and love. Sacraments are a sign of grace, and God's good will toward us.

This sacrament is often called a few different names. I think it is important for us to understand what they are and what they mean. The word Eucharist comes from a Greek word that means to give thanks. In the accounts of the meal in the upper room, as well as in the stories of the feeding of the multitudes, the action of Jesus is described as taking, blessing or giving thanks, breaking, and giving. In Matthew (26:26-27) and Mark (14:22-23), Jesus blesses the bread and gives thanks over the cup. Calling the meal the Eucharist helps us remember that at the breaking of the bread and sharing of the cup, Jesus gave thanks to God for God's saving work in the world. It also emphasizes the praise and thanksgiving that we offer to God in our prayer at the Lord's table and our sharing in the bread and cup.

When we use the words Lord's Supper, we are drawing on Paul's description of the meal in 1 Corinthians 11. In this passage Paul takes the church to task for its abuse of the Supper. The Corinthian church had allowed divisions to occur and inequity to grow between members of the community. Some in the church arrived early, eating and drinking in such a way that those who arrived later went hungry (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). For Paul, such action betrayed the intent of the Lord's Supper as an act of the whole body of Christ, which is the church. It is tempting to believe the holy meal belongs to the church. But Paul's warning to the Corinthian church suggests that it is not our holy meal to which we invite others but Christ's meal—the Lord's Supper—to which we are invited.

That is, we are not the host to the meal; Jesus is our host. He invites us to his supper so that we may be joined with him and with one another around his table.

The third common name for the holy meal is Holy Communion. This name reflects the fact that as we gather around the Lord's table, we commune with Christ and with one another. When Paul challenged the Corinthian church, he challenged their failure to see how communion with God required communion with one another. The Corinthians failed to recognize the body of Christ was truly present in the community of faith gathered at the table. Through our sharing of the bread and cup together in the community of faith, we are brought into relationship with God in Christ Jesus as well as into a relationship of love for one another. In Holy Communion our giving thanks to God and sharing in the Lord's Supper becomes a means by which we begin to fulfill the two great commandments to love God and our neighbors.

When we call the holy meal Eucharist, we remember the thanksgiving Jesus offered to God as he gathered his disciples for a meal. In Eucharist, we continue to offer our

praise and thanksgiving to God. We thank God not only for the bread and cup (symbols of Christ's life, death, and resurrection) but also for all that God has done and continues to do to save the world. When we call the holy meal the Lord's Supper, we focus on the One who invites us to the meal, the One who offers us the bread of life and the cup of salvation. When we call the holy meal Holy Communion, we name the result of our gathering at the table: We are brought into and sustained in a relationship with God and neighbor.

It is imperative that we remember that this is not our table, but it is God's table. We are invited to be at this special meal. Galatians 3:23-29 tells us that we are all God's beloved children. I especially like the way the Message Bible puts it, saying "In Christ's family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ.

Also, since you are Christ's family, then you are Abraham's famous "descendant," heirs according to the covenant promises." God does not divide us, God does not say anyone is unworthy of being at this table. It is humankind who tries to do that. It is one of my favorite parts of the United Methodist Church, that this is an open table. That God says to each person "you are loved, you are worthy, you are mine. Come, be in communion with me and with this group of people. You are welcome here."

Today, on World Communion Sunday, Christians all over the world are celebrating God's love by participating in this sacrament. The jeans may be different in different churches, denominations, and countries, but the message is the same. God is love. We are worthy of that love.

We have an amazing opportunity this week to open God's table further than the doors of this church. Through the NoEL ministry, which stands for No Empty Lunchbox, we are reaching out to 68 children in our neighborhood this week, children who may not have a meal to eat during Fall Break. We are saying take this lunch. This is Jesus. Wrapped up in a sandwich, and in a lunch bag, a plain brown paper bag. Much like the plain manger that our king was born in this plain brown paper bag represents Jesus' love to these children and we get to be the hands and feet that deliver it. God tells us all that we are loved and worthy of love. It is our great privilege that we are able to share that love with others. NoEL is just one of the ways we can do that. I wonder how many of the children who will receive these bags feel as if the church, not just this church, but THE church, is not a place they belong? That God is not the loving creator we know God to be? I know I had years of believing just that. Years of not understanding that I was God's beloved child, worthy of his love and the love of others. This church reached out to me to help me know the love of God. I pray we all can reach out to others to help them know the same love.

Let's pray now for these children. Will you join me? Lord, we ask that you bless not only the hands who will prepare and deliver these lunches to our neighborhood children, but also the children who will receive them. Wrap them in your love, show them that there is a community of faith just down the street that is praying for them, that cares about them,

and that welcomes them. We know we may never see these children in our building, Lord, but we claim them as our own family, and as such, we want nothing but the best of them. It is in your name we pray, amen.

Thank you church. Thank you for being the people of God who opens their tables, their calendars, their wallets, their hearts to support ministries like NoEL, which indeed furthers God's kingdom in our community.

As I said, Communion is a special sacrament to me, and I am so glad you are here to participate in it with me today. If you have not taken communion before, I encourage you to open your heart and hear God's invitation to participate today. I am praying for you. If you are not ready to meet God in this place quite yet, I encourage you to pray about it. And know that I am praying for you as well. You should also feel free to come and talk to Pastor Howard or I anytime. If you are prepared to meet God here, in this place today, know that I am praying for you as well. Can you tell that Prayer is a big part of my ministry? I thank God for this church, for this denomination, and for all of you!

Now, let's join together in this mystery of our faith and celebrate communion together. Amen.