

MARCH 13, 2022

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Rest. Reflect. Refresh. Regroup. Recommit.

Lent 2022

SERMON March 6, Disciplines: Communion Leviticus 6:24-7:10, Matthew 26:26-28

This week we begin our Lenten Series. Lent is a time of reflection, meditation, repentance, and drawing near to God as we prepare to observe the power and gravity of Good Friday and the joy of Resurrection Sunday. To do these things requires intentionality. It requires discipline. Discipline is simply maintaining a consistent focus to work towards an end goal. In our faith journey, we have things called Spiritual Disciplines. These are consistent, focused things that we can do to draw near to God, deepen our faith, and live more correctly in God's sight. Throughout Lent we'll be focusing on different spiritual disciplines each week.

This week, as it is communion Sunday, we focus on the spiritual discipline of holy communion.

In order to grasp our own understanding of communion, it's helpful to start by acknowledging that there is no universal agreement about the significance of communion and even how it's observed.

At the base, there is the question of whether communion is an ordinance or a sacrament. An ordinance is more like a suggestion. It's not necessary, but it's not a bad idea. An ordinance doesn't necessarily carry with it any major significance of the sacred. On the other hand, sacrament carries very sacred significance. The best definition I've heard of what makes a sacrament is that it is both an outward expression of an inward experience and Jesus said to do it. In the Protestant church there are two, baptism and communion. Jesus Himself was baptized and when confronted by John who said it was he who needed to be baptized by Jesus, His reply was that it is correct to be baptized. Jesus Himself instituted communion and the Last Supper with the disciples. The water of baptism is an outward expression of our inward condition of giving ourselves over to Christ. The elements of communion being taken in express the inward experience of God's grace working in us for salvation and transformation.

You can often tell where a church or tradition falls in the ordinance vs. sacrament scale by how often communion is celebrated, the understanding of the elements, and who is allowed to receive communion.

There are traditions that may only celebrate communion once each year. These tend to be churches that hold to communion as an ordinance.

On the other hand we have the Catholic church. There are Catholic churches that hold multiple masses each day. Communion can be celebrated daily if so desired. This is a sign that it is an incredibly holy sacrament, and central to their expression of worship before God.

There is everything in between. Some celebrate weekly, others like the United Methodist Church monthly, and others quarterly.

Even within a tradition that has a set schedule, different people view the necessity of communion differently.

The elements themselves are a sign as to how communion is perceived. For those who see it as an ordinance, a suggestion rather than a necessity, it is merely bread and juice, nothing more.

The other end of the spectrum hold to the idea of transubstantiation. This means that there is belief that the elements literally transform into the body and blood of Jesus. As such the elements are treated very sacredly. In some instances, participants aren't allowed to eat for a certain amount of time before receiving communion. The body of Christ is sacred and holy, and so to let those elements mingle with your morning pop tart in the stomach is spiritually inappropriate. Disposing of unused elements has a ritual to it as well because of the sacredness attached to them.

Some of you have heard me tell the story of my uncle. My father's side of the family was EUB and then after the merger United Methodist. My uncle was Catholic, but often attended worship with my aunt. Early on, the pastor loved to have a dramatic celebration of communion. He always had a big, crusty loaf of bread to break that would crumble all over to represent "this is My body, broken for you."

My uncle was mortified! Here this pastor was dropping Jesus all over the floor!

In the Methodist tradition, we kind of go midway between the extremes. You'll hear in the prayer to bless the elements asking God to make these common elements of bread and juice uncommon vehicles of Your grace. The elements are bread and juice, but as we take them in we ask that God pour out a unique and powerful portion of grace as we remember this central, sacred moment in our faith where the love of God was abundantly poured out on the cross.

Finally, there is the question of who is, and is not, allowed to receive communion. There is what is known as open or fenced tables.

An open table means that anyone is invited to receive communion. A fenced table sets boundaries on who is and is not allowed. Typically the rule is that you must be a member in good standing of that tradition.

John Wesley understood the grace of God to be so potentially powerful in the moment of receiving communion that it may be sufficient to move the heart of an unbeliever to believe. He was staunch about an open table as why would we deprive anyone of the possibility of redemption?

That said, he had an odd sensibility for those who were already believers. The Methodist movement in England and eventually the colonies was largely composed of small groups called classes. One of the functions of these classes was to provide accountability for Christian living. Part of this accountability was that if someone was discerned to not be sufficiently faithful, they would be denied the opportunity to receive communion that week. This was a practice that got Wesley into some serious trouble at one point in his life and ministry.

The idea of excluding someone has its roots in a passage in Corinthians where Paul talks about eating and drinking in an “unworthy fashion”. The scripture is pretty plain about what’s going on. Some are coming and eating and drinking way too much, meaning there wouldn’t be enough to go around. Communion may have been celebrated throughout the course of the day. Those with the luxury of time and not being occupied with as much work could come earlier. Those who hadn’t the luxury came later. The crowd coming earlier was overindulging at the expense of the others. The “unworthy manner” was their spirit in the moment. It wasn’t about the sacredness and holiness of the remembrance, rather it was something social and violated the sense of community of the early church by disregarding their brothers and sisters who would want to celebrate later on.

This brings us to why communion is such a vital discipline and useful through this season of Lent. The spirit of the sacrament. The reverence we bring to the moment. The anticipation of the grace of God given, assured because of the grace already poured out in the event we remember. The event of the cross.

In Leviticus we see the old covenant Law. There were offerings for guilt and sin. Romans tells us that the wages of sin is death. The consequence for sin is blood. The Law commanded a substitute for the offender in the form of an animal. However in God’s sight, the animal is not equivalent to the person. The sacrifice satisfied temporarily, but needed to be repeated.

Jesus came to fulfill this covenant and establish a new one. No sinful person would die as a final sacrifice to satisfy the penalty for all of us. In an incredible, miraculous act of love, God forsakes the paradise of heaven to dwell in a fallen world, embodied in flesh and blood. He would endure the temptation we all do, yet not succumb. Because we could never provide the necessary sacrifice for ourselves, God does it for us.

Our task? To accept the gift of salvation. How do we know we’ve done this? Because in communion with the Holy Spirit, we are no longer who we used to be, and continue a journey of transformation from salvation to the moment we enter Glory.

Experiencing communion fully has multiple layers to it. First, there is the experience in the name of the sacrament itself, communing. To commune is to share together. This sharing is more than average. It is typically intimate and vulnerable.

We commune with God in this moment. We bare our hearts and drink in God’s grace. We commune with one another. The experience of confession is personal, and sharing space together as we come before God seeking mercy for our misdeeds is vulnerable.

When we are part of a larger group such as our denomination that celebrates communion together on the same day, we spiritually are communing with our brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world.

We know this for certain in those moments when our hearts are all striking that correct note of coming before God with the right spirit, in one accord as the disciples did on Pentecost, and there comes an almost tangible spirit descending on the gathering. You can’t see it, but you can’t miss or mistake it.

It’s more than this.

As we remember Christ going to the cross we remember His devotion to His people and the sacrifice of the fullness of His ministry. He knew He’d be hated, ignored, mistreated, misunderstood, and ultimately tortured and killed. Yet he willingly endured it all for our good. The Creator coming in humility to sacrifice all for the creation.

This is one reason why we are correct to come with humble and confessing hearts before God. The One who has quite literally done everything on our behalf set this world in motion and the creatures in it with a design for how we should use the creation and treat one another in it. When we thumb our nose at those foundational directions, offered only in love, consequence is the understandable result.

And yet even though consequence is understandable, God’s desire isn’t for us to suffer the that consequence. God has provided a way for us to not only be spared, but also make us better by transforming us more into the image of Christ in the process.

Communion properly celebrated brings us together with God, with one another, and with believers around the world. It is the sobering confrontation with our own sinfulness mixed with the power of the Holy Spirit that empowers us to be repentant. It is the joy that comes from knowing the goodness and love of God that redeems us freely. It is the excitement of allowing the grace of God to transform us once again, knowing that this journey of transformation will continue on and on.

All of this together makes communion a discipline that is necessary, and in this season of Lent all the more so. When we keep the meaning of this remembrance forward in our hearts and minds we are inspired to do and be better. We are inspired to gratitude to God that spurs us on to love more and more powerfully. We are compelled to allow the Spirit to transform us. We can’t help but then shine more brightly as a light of Christ in the world inviting it into the same saving relationship with our Lord.

BIBLE STUDY- Acts 13

The beginning of Acts 13 marks a major shift in Luke's telling of the early church. The focus shifts from Peter to Saul, and there is a much larger and stronger Gentile presence.

There is a striking difference in leadership in Antioch compared to Jerusalem. Jerusalem has this very homogenous group of Jewish leaders on every front. Whether it's the believer or not, the population Luke focuses on is primarily Jewish. There isn't a whole lot of diversity. Here in Antioch, where this Gentile mission is taking off, we see a much broader spectrum of leadership. Of course Gentiles are drawing from a much bigger pool of people as well.

Having a bigger scope in personality of leaders is a good thing. It was good then, and it's good now. When everyone is of fairly like mind, it becomes difficult to see blind spots because everyone has the same ones. It's hard to think outside the box when everyone has been contained in the same box. Diversity provides balance, fresh perspectives, and a richer and wider span of what ministry can and will look like.

This group of leaders has a sort of "commissioning" service for Saul and Barnabas as they lay hands on them before sending them off on their mission. We have a feel of a kind of "apostle light" status going on with Saul and Barnabas. They don't meet the full pedigree of an apostle, yet the Holy Spirit clearly sets them apart and calls the church to send them out on their missionary journey. We know now that one or both of them have a great destiny ahead of them. Luke's focus on Saul earlier gives us a clue as to which one will have the grander career.

They head off to the island of Cyprus. Maps have been drawn and people fascinate about the course of these missionary journeys. In truth, the locations simply follow a logical path from their point of origin as they go out on their journey. What are far more significant are the interactions Luke chooses to include while they are on their adventure.

At the outset, Saul and Barnabas are working primarily with the Jews still. What we'll see is that Saul and Barnabas seem to need to see for themselves that they've exhausted their efforts on Israel and can go to the Gentiles in good conscience. Here it begins with a Jewish false prophet. He is clearly a shady dude, and in cahoots with a government official, the proconsul. When the proconsul sends for Saul and Barnabas, the prophet throws a fit. It's likely that here there is the same friction the apostles met in Jerusalem. If Saul and Barnabas succeed in persuading the proconsul, Bar-Jesus' political ally and clout may dry up. So he "opposes" them.

In the ensuing drama we see two things happen. First we see Saul's boldness and that he is wielding the spiritual power of an apostle. Holding Elymas to account, he strikes him blind (not unlike he'd experienced himself). This demonstration lets us know that Saul is genuinely empowered and authorized by the Holy Spirit.

Second, we see the name Elymas and Paul show up. Luke does this intentionally to symbolized something for us. Elymas and Paul are the Gentile equivalents of their Jewish names. We are being shown that Paul is getting ready to jump into a whole new pool of ministry.

This poses a question. Do labels matter? Yes and no. In terms of spirit and authenticity, we rely on the character of the individual no matter what they are called. However there is also a reality that sometimes a simple change just makes things easier. How we are known matters to those who don't yet know us personally. If our trappings can be changed to make introductions smoother, and it doesn't compromise our faith and integrity, why not? Paul allows it and we know how successful his ministry was.

This brief verse where it tells us that "John went back to Jerusalem" may be Luke foreshadowing something to come. This is likely John Mark, who Paul later refused to journey with because of some kind of abandonment. We don't know why John headed back to Jerusalem here, but this could be the moment of breaking between he and Paul.

When Paul and Barnabas get to Pisidian Antioch, something miraculous happens. They go in to the synagogue and are asked to elaborate on the scriptures. This wasn't necessarily common. To be offered this opportunity as strangers was a big deal.

What comes next is incredible. Paul launches into a speech that we have no need to recap because we've seen all of the elements before from Peter and Stephen. He recounts events in Israel's history, framing them in the context of Jesus as the Messiah. He uses example after example familiar to us in previous speeches. Where he deviates a bit is including Gentile proselytes in the mix. Here there are "pure" Jews and Gentiles who share to some extent in Jewish beliefs and sensibilities.

In verse 31 we see a nod to the apostles who pass the full muster of apostolic pedigree. "These are the witnesses to our people." He recognizes their authority and place in striving to bring the Jewish people to faith in Christ. If later Paul would butt heads with the Jerusalem church, here it lifts them up in regard and respect.

Paul exhibits an important trait in leadership. He's not tooting his own horn. He is following the Holy Spirit's lead, which gives him words similar to Peter's and seemingly a persuasiveness to match. But rather than uplift himself as the new heavy hitter on the block he is acknowledging those apostles who truly did the work and walked with Jesus arm in arm. Humility is a cornerstone of leadership. The talk is so powerful he and Barnabas are invited to return. Through the week the gossip mill has been busy. Come the next Sabbath word has spread and the "whole city" shows up.

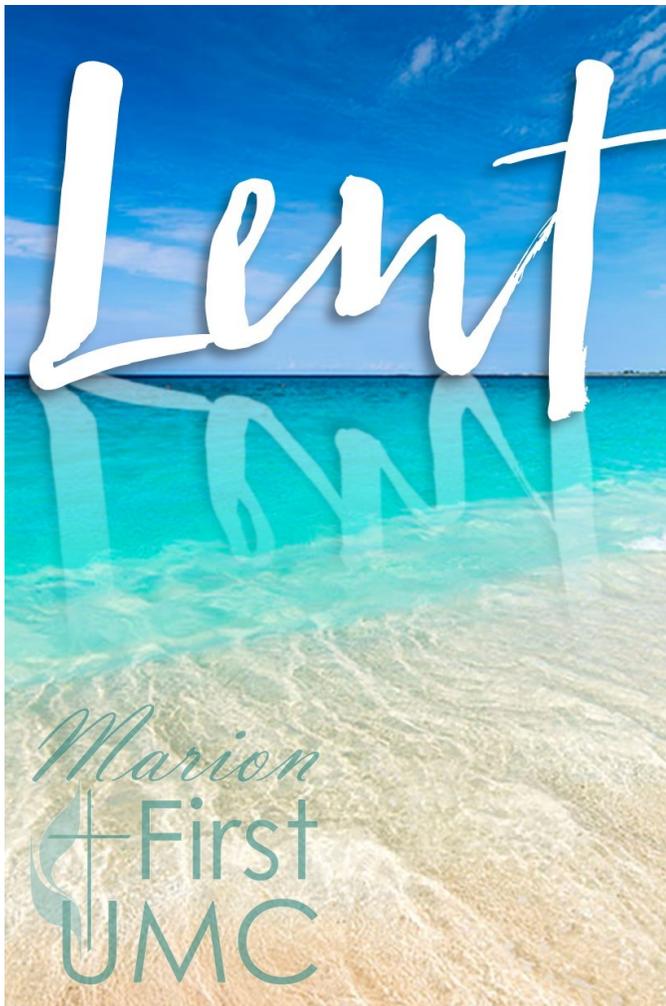
Luke is doing something important for us here. He is showing us that Paul is gifted by the Spirit to act and speak in power. He will be a kind of Peter to the Gentiles. The content of the speech being so close to Peter's is a sign both of Paul's credibility as well as the consistency of message from the Holy Spirit to interpret and share the Word of God.

The reaction of the Jewish people that see these large crowds is what Paul needs to motivate him into the mission God has for him. They are angry and jealous at Paul's success. They argue and berate him. This convinces both Paul and Barnabas that they've had enough of going to the Jews. They see that they aren't receptive and are even hostile to the message. Instead, this life giving message will now be shared with the Gentiles, leaving the Jews can stay in their darkness.

On one hand, it might be said that in this instance Paul and Barnabas failed. They couldn't persuade this particular group. At the same time, we have to remember that sometimes what looks like failure is in actuality a success. Paul and Barnabas had a mission. Paul knew about it likely from the time Ananias restored his sight after being blinded on the road to Damascus. Yet they were stuck in their Jewish roots, feeling the need to try and try again to drive the gospel home for their own people. Sometimes it is in failing to accomplish what we think we are supposed to accomplish that we are spurred on to what we were really put on this earth to do. The reaction is split, one aspect priming the mission to the Gentiles. Like most people, the Gentile hearers of this were flattered. Israel's rejection becomes their treasure and gain. They are humbled and excited to be included in this great gospel covenant. The rejection by the Jews opens the door to the Gentiles and here even seems to draw the Gentiles even closer to the message of salvation. Like their predecessors, Paul and Barnabas are targeted for persecution by the influential and higher standing folks. They are kicked out of the city.

As they head to Iconium they do something very "Jesusy". Remember when Jesus sent out the disciples two by two. He told them that if any town refused to receive their message they were to shake the dust from their sandals as they left as a warning to them of the impending judgement as a result of their lack of faith. This tradition carries on in the missionary journey of the early church.

After all of this, the disciples are filled with joy. Why? There is this continual thread through believers that there is always a balance struck between suffering and gain for the Kingdom of God. Suffering for the name of Christ was an honor and privilege as they understood themselves to be walking in the footsteps of Jesus in doing so. Suffering also frequently upended the plans of the persecutors. In the end, time after time, the plans intended to squelch the ministry of the early church only served to make it more compelling and more effective. To suffer for Christ was an honor, to have that suffering continue to expand the kingdom perhaps a greater honor still. In this one chapter Luke establishes Paul as a force to be reckoned with in ministry, begins to embellish upon the nature of leadership in the Gentile church, and gives Paul's compelling reason for moving away from his own people, the Jews, to become a powerful apostle to the Gentiles.



Rest

FROM OBSESSIONS

Reflect

ON GOD'S MERCIES

Refresh

FAITH & PURPOSE

Regroup

WITH FAITH FAMILY

Recommit

TO CHRIST'S CALLING