

Ironies of the Passion Maundy Thursday

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.²⁷ Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord.²⁸ A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. (1 Corinthians 11:23-29)

Do This in Remembrance of Me

When my family left Colombia, the members of the church there gave us gifts to remember them by. One gift stands out in my mind. It was a porch. A traditional form of art in Colombia is making models of porches to hang on your wall. Some are quite small. This one was large and elaborate and a beautiful example of the art form. Why do we need gifts to remember people by? Do you think my wife and I could ever forget the love the members showed us while we were there? Can any of us ever forget the people we've treasured in our past? I hope not. But one of the ironies of life is the human capacity to put the past in the past. I suppose it's necessary. We can't spend our whole lives aching to see people we once knew and loved. Our brains are hardwired to move on. Yet, sometimes we want to recall those people and their love, even if it hurts to miss them. The gifts they've given us help bring back all that we knew and treasured about those people. So that we might always treasure what Jesus has done for us, he gave us something to remember him by: the Lord's Supper. Tonight, we stand with Jesus in the upper room and we hear him tell us, "**Do this in remembrance of me.**"

I.

How do we choose the tokens of affection we give to the people we love? Sometimes, we choose things that have personal meaning. I once bought a beer stein in Germany for my grandfather and when he died, my grandmother made sure she gave it back to me. Sometimes, we choose things that just "fit" – that Colombian porch fit because it reminds us of the culture of the people we served there. But sometimes, you kind of scratch your head when you see the gift someone gives you. Is that the case in the Lord's Supper? Now, I'm sure, you're saying, "Of course not!" We treasure the gift Jesus gave us. But Jesus said: "**Do this in remembrance of me.**" What was "this"? Eating bread and drinking wine. Jesus wasn't trying to remind his disciples of the good times they had had together. Jesus called the bread his body and the wine his blood. How would bread and wine symbolize Jesus' body and blood?

The truth is, they wouldn't. If Jesus were looking for a symbol of his body and blood he could've chosen something more obvious. But Jesus chose bread and wine. Now, they were on the table in front of him because he was celebrating the Passover. Two elements of that meal were unleavened bread and wine. But the heart of the Passover was the lamb. At the first Passover, the blood of a lamb painted on the doorframe saved the lives of God's people. And the Passover meal commemorated that deliverance for 1500 years until Jesus gave his own life and by his blood delivered the entire world from sin and death. So the meat of the lamb would've made a great symbol for the body of Jesus, the Lamb of God. But that's not what he chose for communion. He chose the unleavened bread. He chose the wine. Why? In the case of the bread it might be because yeast often represents sin in the Bible. Jesus came here as a man without sin, represented by bread without yeast. The wine perhaps recalls the spilling of his blood, because drops of wine are spilled at various points in the celebration of the Passover. But that's conjecture. God doesn't tell us why he chose bread and wine. But he does tell us what they really are.

Jesus said, "**This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.**" And "**This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.**" Jesus put his real body and his real blood into communion. Now, that doesn't mean the bread and wine are gone. They're present, too. But Jesus' body and blood make this the perfect gift. And it's ours when we "do this." In other words, the body and blood of Jesus are not present on the altar right now. But when we come forward and

receive the sacrament, we will receive the real body and blood of Christ in and with and under the real bread and wine. When we're done, all that will be left on the altar is bread and wine. But we will have received the gift Jesus gave.

He gave this gift to us. St. Paul says, **"For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you."** When did Paul receive communion from the Lord? Not on Maundy Thursday. Paul was not yet a disciple then. If he was in Jerusalem, he was eating with Pharisees. If he was thinking about Jesus at all, he wished the authorities would do something about him. Yet Jesus personally passed this on to him. When? Do you remember the story? Paul was traveling to Damascus to arrest Jewish Christians. Suddenly, Jesus appeared to him and he made Paul a Christian. After that, the Holy Spirit led Paul out into the wilderness and for three years, Jesus instructed him there. He told him what he had done in the upper room and he commanded Paul to pass this gift on to every church he founded. Jesus gave this gift to all Christians everywhere.

In our celebration tonight, we will proclaim the Lord's death. We will proclaim that God became man. God the Son joined himself to a human body and soul so that God could die and rise again. We will proclaim that after living a life of perfect service to God, Jesus died to pay for all our sin and weakness. Three days later, he rose to give us eternal life. That life and death and life again is what Jesus gives us in this gift.

Several years ago, my mother gave me a Bible that was printed in the 1700's. Whenever pastors come to see me, I pull it out to impress them. After almost three hundred years, that book is showing signs of age. I don't read from it on daily basis because it would never survive. Even if I'm able to leave it to my children or my great-grandchildren, one day, time will win and that Bible will perish. But we will eat the bread and drink the cup and proclaim Jesus' death until he comes. We will proclaim the forgiveness of sins and life in God's name because when we eat and drink, we share the very body Jesus offered on the cross and the very blood that ran down his face and out of his side. We share the price God paid to free us from death and hell. We call this teaching "Real Presence." Jesus' body and blood are really present here in communion. I can't explain how. I can't whip out a microscope and show it to you. But Jesus tells us this is true. And he tells us to treasure this gift until he returns. Jesus said, **"Do this in remembrance of me." Communion is a real presence remembrance.**

II.

My great-grandmother gave my mother some crystal dishes. When we were children, my little brother swung on the doors of the cabinet that held that crystal and he dumped it out. It was all destroyed. My mother wept when she lost those tokens of love. The Lord's Supper is more than a token. It's more than just something to remember Jesus by. It's the visible preaching of the gospel. It's the body and blood of Christ given to us every time we kneel here. What if someone abused that?

The congregation in Corinth had been abusing the Lord's Supper. Some of them were even getting drunk before they celebrated it. So Paul said, **"Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord."** Do those words send a chill up your spine? Sometimes, I worry we may misunderstand what Paul is getting at. What does he mean by "unworthy"? Sin makes us unworthy – but Jesus has washed all our sin away. That's what the cross was all about. So only one thing makes us unworthy: unbelief. Only one thing makes us worthy: faith. If we trust in Jesus and in the promises he attaches to communion, we are worthy. If we don't, we aren't.

Practically speaking, what are we talking about? An unbeliever can't be a worthy communicant. He can't trust in Jesus to make him perfect in God's sight. In the same way, a Christian who is not repentant can't be worthy. If you're guilty of sin and you refuse to confess your guilt or to turn from your sin, you are unworthy. That's why the drunkenness and the lovelessness of the Corinthian celebration were so wrong. There's one more way to be unworthy. St. Paul says, **"For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself."** If you do not recognize the body and blood of Christ in and with and under the bread and wine – if you don't believe in the real presence – you do not receive the blessing God put into this sacrament. Instead, you receive judgment.

Jesus is present in this sacrament whether we believe it or not. We receive Jesus' body and blood when we eat and drink whether we repent of our sins or not. If you receive the gospel without faith or repentance, the Bible teaches you receive judgment instead of forgiveness, death instead of life. That's not just true with the Lord's Supper. It's true anytime I proclaim forgiveness to someone who doesn't recognize his sin. For that reason, it's a very dangerous thing to come to the Lord's table unprepared.

That's one reason why we practice closed communion. We only admit those who can examine themselves. Paul says, "**A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.**" What does that mean? In the hymnal, there's a section called, "Personal Preparation for Holy Communion" to help you do it. But it really comes down to three questions: Do you know you're a sinner? Do you trust that Jesus paid for your sin and rose to forgive you? Do you trust that his body and his blood are in the bread and wine to give that forgiveness to you personally? If you answer, "Yes, yes, yes," then you are worthy.

Now, maybe a question is rising in your mind. What if I haven't been worthy in the past? Am I going to hell? No. Did you receive judgment instead blessing? Yes. But Jesus didn't give us this gift to torture us with doubt and guilt. He died and paid for all our sin. He gave us communion to comfort us and to stifle the accusations our own hearts throw up at us. That's what it means to do this in remembrance of him. It means remembering that we are forgiven for all our sins, even for all the times we didn't come to communion in faith. It means hearing Jesus speak to us as we eat and drink. He says, "This is the new covenant." He says, "This is for you." That means he has taken all away our sins. Come, trusting in the forgiveness even of the sins that torment you most. Come, trusting in his promises and receive the blessing of the body and blood of our Lord. Jesus said, "**Do this in remembrance of me.**" **Communion is a gospel remembrance.**

Jesus put his body and his blood into bread and wine. No one could ever have guessed that he would do that. But he did. It would be sad if we didn't come regularly and receive that blessing. It would be sad if we ever forgot what Jesus said or failed to trust in his promise and robbed ourselves of this blessing. This is a treasure from God. It's not like the treasures of this life. Would you ever stop treasuring the gifts of love you've received? It happens. Sometimes, we find something we haven't looked at in years and when we try to remember why we treasured it, it no longer moves us. That cannot happen with communion, because the power is not emotion. It's not nostalgia. The power is the body and blood of Christ given by Jesus' word and command to take our sins away. That gives us peace, no matter how unfaithful we may have been in the past. Do this in remembrance of Jesus. Amen.