

# The Lord's Supper: Explain That Again

## World Communion Sunday

Matthew 26:17-19, 26-30    1 Corinthians 11:23-2  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Of the world's nearly 7 billion inhabitants, roughly 2 billion (about 30 %) consider themselves to be associated with the Christian faith. Today, a majority of Christian churches across the entire world are celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (also known as Communion, or the Eucharist) in recognition of our oneness, unity and commonality as followers of Jesus.

This is an especially important message in our day and age of increasing divisiveness and polarization. It becomes even more relevant when we acknowledge that the persons with whom many of us feel the most divided and polarized are with other Christians of differing theological perspectives, practices and beliefs.

Interestingly, however, it is this very sacrament that has led to a lot of historical division within the church itself. So on this particular **World Communion Sunday** I thought it would be appropriate to speak on the various understandings of the Lord's Supper. First of all, we need to recognize the many, many different religious backgrounds represented right here in this congregation. That includes traditions as diverse as Episcopalian to Mennonite, Baptist to Roman Catholic, UCC to Pentecostal, and even a few life-long Presbyterians, among many others, or of no religious background at all. So you can imagine how many different religious teachings we all together have grown up with concerning the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

Understandings within the Presbyterian denomination itself have even changed over time. Many of us grew up in congregations that served Communion only four times a year. Most now serve it every month. Many of us grew up not being allowed to participate in the Lord's Supper until we finished Confirmation Class in our early teenage years. That's when we moved from the category called Baptized Member to Active Member by making a public Profession of Faith. Now, however, even the youngest of children are allowed to share in this sacrament. This change came about, in part, to emphasize **it is God's grace we recognize and acknowledge in this sacrament more than our knowledge and understanding of it.**

So the place where we should probably start this morning is with the following question: **What is your understanding of Communion? What does it mean to you to partake of the bread and the cup?** Well, perhaps you're not exactly sure what it means, you just know it's something important to the church. If that's the case for you, then you're in very good company. For our own John Calvin wasn't too sure either. He's the person to whom we Presbyterians trace our roots back to the Protestant Reformation in 16<sup>th</sup> century Geneva, Switzerland.

In one of my favorite quotes from **John Calvin**, he wrote the following concerning the Lord's Supper, "It is a mystery too sublime for me to be able to express, or even to comprehend; and, to be still more explicit, **I rather experience it, than understand it.**" Our progressive approach towards Christianity has helped many of us say the same thing about God – that God is something we experience more than we understand. John Calvin was a great thinker, and a very logical and rational theologian. Yet he was honest enough with himself to admit that **when it comes to the grace and ways of God, there are some things he just had to realize are still a mystery.** To this day, I think we should be cautious of anyone who thinks they have God all figured out – and that applies to folks on all sides of the theological spectrum.

That being said, Presbyterians, like other denominations, have tried to put into words our own unique understanding of The Lord's Supper. While I do not feel it is my role as the pastor of this church to tell you what you should believe (like that would do any good anyway), it is my role to at least inform you of things Presbyterian. Most things Presbyterian are discussed in what is called the **Book of Order**. It is a part of our church's constitution, along with our *Book of Confessions*.

For one thing, you may not know that we Presbyterian pastors cannot serve the Lord's Supper without prior approval from the Session of the congregation or the presbytery. Also, except for sharing it with the homebound and sick Communion can only be served at a public service of worship where everyone is invited to participate. Concerning our approach to whome we offer Communion, we Presbyterians have what is called "**open communion**" where **all Christians, not just Presbyterians, are welcome to the table.** This differs from a "closed communion" where, like in the Roman Catholic tradition for example, only other Catholics are invited to participate fully. **Our Book of Order states:**

The invitation to the Lord's Supper is extended to all who have been baptized, remembering that access to the Table is not a right conferred upon the worthy, but a privilege given to the undeserving who come in faith, repentance, and love. **Even one who doubts or whose trust is wavering may come to the Table in order to be assured of God's love and grace in Christ Jesus.**

That most likely includes each one of us at one point or another in our lives, perhaps you this morning. If so, know that you are indeed welcome!

Before the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, the common understanding of the Church was that the *only* way to receive God's saving grace was through the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist. This belief, unfortunately, led to many abuses where priests would deny access to the sacrament, even to the extreme of permanent excommunication from the church for those who didn't believe or behave the way the church wanted. The result of their (mis)understanding of having the power and authority to cut someone off from God's grace served, in their minds, as a way to condemn that person to hell – or more likely, to get folks to conform to the ways and teachings of the Church. The Protestant reformers, including Presbyterians, did not believe that. Then and now, **we believe that God's grace, while certainly present in this sacrament, can come to any person at any time and at any place of God's choosing.** Think of the spiritual arrogance it would take for to me or anyone else to think the clergy

have the power and authority to decide to whom and how God will bless others with God's grace!

**So one of the primary purposes of the Protestant Reformation was to shift the focal point of worship from the Eucharist to the reading of the Bible and its interpretation peached in the sermon.** In fact, that's why Protestants were historically called "people of the Word." **Teaching directly from the Bible replaced teaching primarily from church doctrine and tradition.**

A couple of more brief points. For Presbyterians, this sacrament is more than just a memorial – more than simply a remembrance of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. That's where the bread and the cup come into play. When it comes to the significance of the actual bread and wine (or grape juice), Presbyterians really differ from Roman Catholics, and even from Martin Luther, considered the first great Protestant reformer. In fact, it was primarily over this difference of understanding that led John Calvin to split from the Martin Luther.

The historical Roman Catholic Church taught something called "**transubstantiation.**" During the Eucharist, they believed that the *substance* of the bread itself actually transformed somehow to the real substance of the body of Jesus; the wine to the real substance of the blood of Christ – though neither one actually changed in appearance, odor, or taste. Contrary to this understanding, John Calvin thought of the elements in a much different way. He taught, as we teach today, that **Jesus Christ is present during communion, but spiritually, not in physical substance.** After all, he rationalized, if Jesus is sitting at the right hand of God, he can't also be physically present somewhere else. **So if anyone asks you about what Presbyterians believe about the bread and cup, the simple answer is: Presbyterians believe in the real spiritual presence of Christ when we partake.**

So as we share the bread and the cup in a few moments, think about **what it means to you to have the very real spiritual presence of Christ among us, and within you.** The bread and the juice, then, act as visible signs and symbols. And as symbols they point beyond themselves to a deeper spiritual reality. That reality, and this is the most important part, involves the promises that God has made to us in this new covenant – this new relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ. Therefore, **the bread and the cup outwardly represent those things that God is doing for us inwardly.**

One of the most important things God is doing for us is feeding you and me spiritually. Just as food provides nourishment for our hungry bodies, **the Lord's Supper promises spiritual nourishment for our hungry souls.** But perhaps **the greatest mystery in this sacrament is that it somehow – somehow – unites us with Christ and with each other,** whether across the world or just across town. Communion, then, acts to remind us that Christ, the Spirit of God, dwells with and within each one of us. The promise in the Lord's Supper is that **we are part of the same community. And as such, we are spiritually connected, regardless of our denominational or personal theological beliefs.** Think of the implications that might have for your life, your actions, and your attitude towards others, and ours as a congregation.

That is what we are celebrating today, our **oneness and unity,** through God's grace, with sisters and brothers across the globe. **And from a progressive perspective, we believe that it also connects us with every person on earth – all 7 billion – because we recognize that all people are children of God and are part of God's family, regardless of faith tradition or none at all.**

So, even if we can't completely understand intellectually what The Lord's Supper is all about, hopefully we will experience it – experience God's empowering and uniting presence *with us*, and *within us*.

Amen.