



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



**The Bread That We Break
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
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October 1, 2006
World Communion Sunday**

On this day, all around the world, churches are sharing in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Worldwide Communion Sunday is a day of celebration and unity, when Christians all around the world follow the example of the apostles, by gathering together, and breaking bread and sharing prayers.

Over the years I have pondered Holy Communion a great deal.

Around 15 years ago the General Synod of the United Church of Christ had a resolution that was passed suggesting that churches take time to study and perhaps approve of inviting children to Holy Communion. The tradition of most churches within the United Church of Christ was for children to receive their first Holy Communion at Confirmation.

To be honest, I had struggled with this. Within our tradition we have two Sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion and we have rites such as Weddings, Funerals, Ordination, and Confirmation. Martin Luther had reduced the Roman Catholic Churches seven Sacraments to two, Baptism and Holy Communion because they were Biblical and the others were not. My thought was, to be less than theologically dazzling, Baptism and Holy Communion were higher on the totem pole than the Rites were and it seemed counterintuitive to me to make a Rite a requirement for someone to be welcomed at the Lord's Table.

Plus, I struggle with anyone being turned away from God's Table, so I was always in trouble.

But I digress.

I taught the lone adult Sunday School class in that church and we had a discussion on Holy Communion. It actually happened by accident. A couple of the men in the class began to complain that we had changed our policy and that children should not be allowed to take Holy Communion because they didn't understand...

I remember that I closed the book I was using and asked this question:

So, since adults understand this, what is Holy Communion?

The silence in the room was deafening. No one had an answer. At least at first.

Some thought that Holy Communion was really the body and blood of Jesus. Some believed that the bread and wine were symbols for Jesus' body and blood. Others saw it as a Memorial meal and little more than that. One person called in a snack. Okay, he was a pain and may have been kidding. Some said that the act of taking Holy Communion was what forgave us our sins; others said that we had to confess our sins to God before Holy Communion because we needed to take Holy Communion with pure hearts.

Quite a conversation!

Holy Communion is a topic that can cause a bunch of theological controversies. That's not what I want to do today. I want to talk about embracing things.

The first thing I would invite you to embrace is to recognize that Holy Communion is, in so many ways, 'bread for the journey.' It is spiritual nourishment we take as we travel down our journeys of faith.

Bread and wine, if you reflect on ancient times, were staples. Everyone ate bread and drank wine. Wine was the one beverage that they could keep and drink at whatever temperature. And bread was so basic. Bread and wine, in the ancient world, were basic nourishment.

It's a good thing to remember. Whenever we gather around the table of the Lord, we are nourished. We embrace the nourishment.

Secondly, embrace the sacrifice of Jesus.

I did not have a clue about Holy Communion until I was in middle school. Being raised Roman Catholic made some comprehension of faith a little different.

Growing up, the Roman Catholic Mass was in Latin. If you didn't understand Latin,

it was hard to follow what was happening. And when it began being done in English, the priest was facing away from the people and you couldn't really see what he was doing.

And I was a kid and didn't pay much attention.

But, the first Sunday I was an altar boy, kneeling behind the priest, I heard the words for the first time. Holy Communion is the retelling of the story of the Last Supper and Jesus saying that he is sacrificing his body and blood for us. Actually, if you noticed, the words that St. Paul used in 1st Corinthians, the text we read today, are pretty much the exact words we use in churches whenever we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The words remind us that Jesus was about sacrifice and we are invited to embrace sacrifice as well.

Many people believe that we can have real faith with no sacrifice. We can have it all from God and give little to nothing back. We give little or no money, we give little or no time, we essentially just give little or no anything. And to think that we 'get it' is a myth. We do not grow in faith without some sacrifice on our behalfs. Holy Communion is a reminder to us. Embrace the sacrifice.

Finally, embrace the mystery.

Jesus was a master of vagueness.

Should we pay taxes? Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, render unto God what is God's.

How do we deal with family disputes? A man had two sons.

Who is my neighbor? A man was walking on the road to Jericho.

Jesus told stories and gave answers that were not always crystal clear. We still look at his parables and so many of his teachings are still not always totally clear.

Whenever we ponder Holy Communion as Christians, you'll note that Christianity does not have one fixed doctrine on Holy Communion. It's even practiced in different ways in different churches. Jesus said, "This is my body and this is my blood," but didn't explain, exactly what he meant by that.

In reality, this makes me quite content. It means that there is always an element of mystery to Holy Communion.

In Christianity there are three large branches, Protestant Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches.

I'm going to use the example of a mud puddle.

Within Protestantism, we don't like mystery a great deal. We want to understand and explain most everything. When we see a mud puddle we analyze why it is there, who put it there, and reflect on if it is useful to us or not. Pending on which denomination we belong to, we may or may not play in the mud, but we'll talk about it a lot.

Within the Roman Catholic Church some mystery is okay, but, if you give them time, they'll explain it. They'll talk a little about the mud puddle, some will stick their feet in the mud, and they'll talk about it a little more.

But I love the Orthodox. They'd see the mud puddle and not wonder where it came from, who put it there, or what use it had. They'd just jump in and enjoy it.

I know, it's a strange image. But sometimes we need to approach Holy Communion like that. So much of it is a mystery. Just embrace the mystery!

We gather as one family today. We gather with Christians around the world. Embrace the nourishment! Embrace the sacrifice! Embrace the mystery!