

Rediscovering the Sacraments - Communion  
October 1, 2006

Today we begin a brief preaching series (just two weeks, today and next Sunday) on rediscovering the sacraments. Today's focus is on communion, and coming into communion with God. There are two passages of scripture that I would share with you. The first from Luke, chapter 22, verses 14-20, is the institution of the Lord's Supper. Then from Acts, chapter 5, verses 12 through 14, is a description of what happens to the body of Christ - the community of faith - when we truly commune with God. If you have your Bible with you, or if you would prefer to use your sermon outline, I invite you to follow along as I share the Word for today.

From Luke, chapter 22, verses 14-20:

“When the hour came, He took his place at the table, and the apostles with Him. He said to them, ‘I have eagerly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of God.’ Then He took a cup, and after giving thanks He said, ‘Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes.’ Then He took a loaf of bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And He did the same with the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.’”

Then from Acts, chapter 5, verses 12 through 14, is what Luke wrote: “Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women . . .”

Here ends the lesson. Will you pray with me, please? Lord, today, we would come to Your table to be spiritually fed. Before we do, Lord, so inspire our hearts, that as we accept the bread broken and the blood shed, we ourselves may be whole and find the life You have promised. In Christ, Amen.

Shall I share with you the strangest gift I ever bought my wife for Mother's Day? (I should offer a disclaimer. I'm of the school that believes when you give a gift to someone, you give a gift that they would appreciate and cherish, not the gift that you would want to give to them. Amen?) And so you can imagine my surprise when, well before Mother's Day, I was talking to my wife and I said, “Well, what would you *really* like for Mother's Day?” She said, “I would like a power washer.” I said, “A power washer? I can't give you a power washer. Do you realize the grief I will take from my friends if I buy you a power washer for Mother's Day?” And she said, “No, I'm serious. I

would like a heavy duty power washer.” I continued to try to dissuade her. I said, “But MaryAnn, you won’t use a power washer.” Hello . . . And at that moment she smiled her sweet, disarming smile and said, “No, but you will!”

So, I bought my wife a power washer. I went to Costco and there happened to be a fellow strolling through that department. I wanted some help, because they had several models from which to choose, and I wanted to know about horsepower and all that. So, I was discussing this with this rather colourful character, engaging in conversation, and he was telling me *all* about power washers and then he stopped (having realized that I’m a neophyte when it comes to power washers). He looked at me and said, “But you’ve got to be careful.” And I said, “Oh, really?” He said, “Oh, yes. You put the small nozzle on that, and you can break windows.” And I said, “No!” And he said, “Yes. You can peel paint.” “Really?” “Yes.” And he said, “If you’re wearing sandals and your feet are dirty and you have that impulse to just rinse them off with a power washer, don’t do it. You can cut skin; you can sever toes.” And I looked at him and said, “Wow! That’ll preach.”

He no doubt thought I was the strangest man ever to buy a power washer, but it started me thinking. I started using this power washer and was amazed at what could be done with it. (You literally *can* peel paint!) You can clean the cement, and undoubtedly tear flesh. But I started thinking about the concentrated power required to make this work. (Holds power washer wand in demonstration.) You attach this end to the hose spigot on your house and then the water is run through a motor which concentrates the simple water from your faucet into a stream that is so powerful, my wife can find innumerable things for me to clean with it!

Now, scientists tell us that as human beings, we use about 10% of our brain capacity. Think carefully with me, please. If that’s true of our minds, might it also be true of our hearts and our souls? Imagine with me for a moment what would happen, as individuals and collectively as a congregation, if we were as focused and concentrated in our love and service in the world. Imagine what we could accomplish by the grace of God!

This morning’s first scripture is about the institution of the Lord’s Supper - Communion. There is a great deal of confusion as to the significance of communion, and we disagree with some of our Christian brothers and sisters as to the theology of it. For instance, our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters believe that when the priest stands at the altar and consecrates the bread, it *literally* becomes the body of Christ. When the cup is consecrated, the wine for our Catholic brothers and sisters *literally* become the blood of Christ. As United Methodists, that’s not what we believe. Jesus was still alive at the last supper when He took up the bread, broke it, and said, “**This is my body broken for you.**” Clearly, he meant it in a figurative, rather than a literal sense. When He took up the cup, He was still alive. He hadn’t suffered the passion of the cross when He said, “**This is my blood**”, suggesting that these (holding up the loaf of bread and the cup of juice) are evocative and rich in symbolism, but not literally the body and blood of Christ. This remains bread, but it reminds us of Christ’s body broken, so that we might be whole. This is grape juice, and it remains grape juice, but it reminds us that Christ’s blood was poured out on the cross in our place. He bled, that we might have life, and life eternal.

Even today, we are cognisant of the power of symbols. I was reading the Media and Marketing section of the Wall Street Journal a couple of weeks ago when I saw a headline that really took this awareness to an absurd level. It read, "Adidas Draws Blood for Rugby Fans." The story goes that the national rugby team of New Zealand, the All Blacks, had taken blood samples from every member of the team, mixed the blood with ink, and made posters to give to patrons who spent at least \$80 on Adidas equipment. Is that a little crazy, or what? Crazy or not, it is indicative of the reverence and esteem we hold for the symbols of life.

Our flag is more than just strips of cloth sewn together; it represents the highest aspirations of these people of the United States. It points beyond itself to something far greater. What I would suggest to you today is that this bread and this cup point beyond themselves to Christ broken that you might be whole - to Him who died that you might have life. And what will it look like if we truly come to communion with him? The gospel author, Luke, wrote two volumes: the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. In the fifth chapter of Acts he said, "Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women . . ." What I would suggest to you is that what happens when we come to commune with God is that we are unified, magnified, and multiplied.

Consider that with me, please. First of all, we become unified in Christ. There is incredible power in that concentration and laser-like focus. It was Abraham Lincoln who said, quoting from scripture, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." That is something that teenagers have known throughout the centuries. Amen? Because a teenager realizes very quickly that if he or she can divide the parents, it's easy to conquer. All that's needed is that fracture in opinion or attitude between mom and dad and it's in the bag. (Speaking to a congregant, "Your daughter's listening *so* carefully at this moment! Laughter ensues.) I suspect that the adversary - the devil - has done that very thing in most churches. Be frank. Be honest to God. Most churches are so fragmented and divided that it's like herding cats, with everyone going a different direction, frequently at odds and enmity with one another. That's why I believe that the devil can ignore most churches, because most churches accomplish very little in terms of worship, fellowship, discipleship, mission, or outreach. Most churches today are ineffectual. It was Henry Ford who said that the continued existence of the church is evidence of God's existence, for no other organization so poorly run could exist without divine intervention. Isn't that good? I like that! But here's the thought: when the church is unified in purpose and service, something extraordinary happens. There is an amazing synchronicity that unfolds.

Joseph Jaworski wrote a wonderful book entitled, Synchronicity, in which he talked about an organization that came together like the parts of a finely-crafted watch; all different sizes, all different factions, coming together for a singular purpose. Do you understand the impact of people coming together with a shared focus on God and a

shared, united purpose in life? It unleashes something of extraordinary power! We saw it in the United Methodist movement begun by John Wesley. It wasn't an institution, it wasn't a church - it was a passionate movement that carried the Good News of Christ to all the world. And it drew people together and united their hearts in joy, love, and awesome service. Even today, we see glimpses of that and it astounds us and fills us with joy.

The example that leaps immediately to my mind is the golf outing just this past Sunday. Some of you were there. It was glorious! Something like 80 golfers got together and there was so much good-natured laughter and love shared, it was evident what God is doing in our midst. Imagine what will happen if we are united and focused in service to Him. What happens is that the church which is unified becomes magnified, for God takes ordinary people and, by His blessings, accomplishes the extraordinary. Are any of you U2 fans? (Thanks, Barb; I'm glad you're at this service today! There's a fellow U2 fan!) Bono, of course, is the lead singer of U2 and I suspect he's a Christian; I'm not sure, but I think so. From the things he says, sometimes I really believe he is, and then at other times I wonder. Anyway, he went on a trip to Ethiopia with his wife and children. (Imagine that!) They spent two weeks at a home for AIDS orphans and, while he was there, he prayed, and his prayer was really very simple: "God, don't you care?" He reiterated this prayer until finally, he sensed God speaking - he heard the voice of the Almighty in his heart saying, "Yes, I do, so *do* something!" And that's exactly what Bono did. He began a worldwide campaign involving nations, governments, people, and churches, and today, he has raised over \$10 millions dollars to fight the AIDS pandemic in Africa! We hear that and say, "Of course, it's Bono. He's a star. What can I do? I'm just an ordinary soul. What can happen with me?"

Bob Mueller is a member of our church, and a retired optometrist. He is a very tall gentleman in his 80s, who comes to the 11 o'clock service. We sat down recently and chatted. He said, "Jim, how much is it going to cost to send people on that Nicaraguan mission trip next summer?" I said, "Bob, its going to be somewhere between \$1,200 and \$1,400 per person." And he looked at me with something of a sly grin and said, "Wouldn't that money be better spent if we just sent it down there?" And I said, "Oh no, Bob! If we send people in their 20s, 30s, or 40s on a mission trip, it will change them for the rest of their lives." And Bob's smiled widened as he said, "I know; my wife and I have been on 8 mission trips together, and I wish we could go with you to Nicaragua." They can barely get around these days, but that experience so changed their hearts, they want to do something extraordinary. Bob told me about his grandson, who went on a mission trip to Japan. When he got home, Bob asked him, "How many conversions did you have? How many people did you lead to Christ?" And his grandson looked at him and said, "Grandad, I led one to Christ." At this point in the story, Bob smiled and said to me, "So I told him that was an awfully expensive conversion; but it was *so* worth it, because my grandson will never be the same."

Don't you understand? That's what happens. Most churches think too small because we don't dare to dream God's dreams; we always try to stay within our own limited capabilities, never realizing that the great miracle of people who commune with Christ is

that their efforts are magnified and a difference is made in the world. When we are unified, we are magnified and multiplied. Now I'm going to be talking about numbers, and that always drives some people nuts. They say, "Oh no! We can't talk about numbers! It's not *all* about church growth, or about counting and numbers - that's not what really matters." I would, respectfully, beg to differ.

I have gone on several teen mission trips with crews of young people, and, as we've pulled out of the parking lot, I've never heard the parents say, "Be sure to bring *most* of them back!" Do you understand? Everyone matters to someone - deeply, dearly, desperately. Do you suppose it's any different with God? *We* think it's about numbers, but it's not, because each number is a name - a person. That name may be Peggy or Hazel, Dave or Jane, Lauren or Ralph, Ray or RoseAnn, or Claudia, David, or Dee, but God knows every one of those names. God longs for *all* of His people to hear the Word of love that will draw them to Him.

I have a confession to make, regarding an experience I had as a young pastor. I was fresh out of seminary; young and naïve. One of my jobs as the associate pastor in Fond du Lac was to make hospital calls. In those days, I was fearful of being "too churchy" - do you know what I mean? (I found people who were "too churchy" to be so off-putting. You know the ones - those folks who stop you and say, "Are you saved?") So I was just kind of going along, being a nice guy, trying to be likeable - if people wanted to talk about faith, great; if they didn't, that was fine, too. One day, a family from the church called me. They had a relative who was hospitalized at St. Agnes Hospital (We used to call it St. Agony!). So, I went up to the hospital, and popped in to see this fellow. He was a sports fan, and we spent our time together talking about the Green Bay Packers. (It's *always* easy to talk about the Green Bay Packers!) At the end of the visit, we had had a great time; I enjoyed his company, and he seemed to have really enjoyed mine. "Hey," I said, "Can I have a brief prayer with you?" And he said, "Sure." I prayed quickly, and went on my way, having had just another pleasant conversation.

The next day the phone rang, and it was this same family calling again to say that their loved one had died during the night, and to ask if I would do the funeral service, even though he was not a member of the church. I said I would, and I did. In the middle of the service, it hit me. My eyes welled up with tears and I'm sure people thought, "Oh, that's sweet; he cares so deeply." Well, I hardly knew the man, but that's why tears filled my eyes. All of a sudden, in that moment, I was convicted of God. I realized that I had been given *one chance* to ask that man if he knew that Jesus loved him. I had been given *one opportunity* to tell him that God intended he spend eternity within His love, and I had blown it! I had missed it talking about sports.

Now, if you believe everyone's going to heaven anyway, we'll just be a nice friendly chaplaincy. We'll just take care of ourselves and, since everybody else is fine anyway, you might as well go to Worlds of Fun, the golf course, or anywhere else, if that's what you believe. I don't. I believe that the people of God are called to offer to the world the love of God, and if we don't, the Word won't be shared. It all comes down to this: Christ's body was broken so that you might be whole, but it wasn't broken just for you!

Christ's blood was shed that you might have life, and have it eternal, but it wasn't shed just for you! God has created His church to be in communion through Christ - unified, magnified, and multiplied - and He has called us to a glorious purpose. It's our choice whether to be the Church or not. Choose carefully; eternity hangs in the balance. Amen?

Pray with me, please: Loving Lord, we come to Your table; our hearts prepare to commune. We ask Your blessing, that You will feed us in such a way that we will never spiritually hunger again. May the bread broken be the key to Your wholeness; the blood shed the offering of life eternal – but not just for us Lord, for all. In Christ, Amen.