

THE LAMB OF GOD

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Luke 22:7-20

Today is World Communion Sunday. World Communion Sunday was the idea of Presbyterian minister Hugh Thomson Kerr. Kerr was a pastor in Pennsylvania and had also served as moderator of the General Assembly in 1930. It was in 1933 that he began promoting this idea of a World Communion Sunday. The idea spread and was adopted by the denomination in 1936 and then endorsed by the National Council of Churches¹ in 1940 and promoted worldwide.

The purpose of World Communion Sunday is to remind Christians around the world that we are part of an interconnected body. We may use different words, have different practices, we may have different theological understandings of Communion, but in Jesus Christ we are one.

Ironically, however, even in our celebration of Communion, we have our differences.

For example, one church I served, offered not one, not two, but three types of communion bread. Originally, they had the little wafers. But along the way someone thought they should offer fresh bread, so they added that to the wafers. But the fresh bread people were divided into those who were okay tearing off a chunk from the loaf and those who thought it too unsanitary. So on Communion Sundays, I would hand out a plate which would contain wafers, precut squares, and a section of the loaf I had broken.

Theologically, this drove me crazy. The one act that should bring us together was divided. I called it cafeteria communion. But it was a system I had inherited and if I tried to change it then I was certain to upset two-thirds of the congregation. Did I bravely take a stand? No. I let it ride.

And then there is the matter of what we call this ritual. Some call it the **Eucharist**, which is derived from the Greek word for 'giving thanks.' We find this in scripture where Jesus takes the bread and gives thanks. Some call this ritual the **Lord's Supper** in reference to the last meal Jesus had with his disciples before his crucifixion. Some call this **Communion** for the way that we are brought together as one body.

But perhaps the greatest division that takes place at the table is our theological understanding of what happens when we gather and partake of the bread and the cup.

¹ It was known then as the Federal Council of Churches.

There are some Christians who adhere to a belief in **transubstantiation**. Most noticeably, this includes the Roman Catholic church. Transubstantiation asserts that the bread and the wine become the actual body and blood of Jesus. The outward appearances of the elements (what we see and taste) remains unchanged, but the substance of the bread and the wine are no longer present.

The Orthodox churches (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and others) also believe that Christ is physically present in the Eucharist but instead of labeling this a sacrament, they call it a divine mystery and make no attempt to explain how the change occurs.

A third view is taken by the Lutheran church and is known as **consubstantiation**. The understanding here is that Christ is physically present in the elements but the substance of the bread and the wine remain intact. The Eucharist is both the body and blood of Christ as well as the bread and wine. Modern Lutherans call this the Sacramental Union.

In the **Presbyterian** church and other reformed bodies, we lean on the teachings of John Calvin who wrote that while Christ is not literally present in the elements, he is spiritually present. The body and blood of Jesus refer to his death on the cross. In the Lord's Supper we become the beneficiaries of his death. We believe that Christ is present at the table through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Other groups, such as the Baptists, adopt a view commonly known as **Memorialism**. They deny any form of physical or spiritual presence of Christ in the bread and wine. The Lord's Supper is a remembrance of Christ's suffering and a reminder of his power to overcome sin and death.

Still other groups do not practice any observance of the Eucharist at all. They don't reject it, they just feel that it is not essential to being a Christian.

Today, thankfully, we don't get all that hung up on these terms. But back in medieval times, these were fighting words. Wars were waged over different interpretations of the Eucharist.

As Presbyterians, we recognize two sacraments—baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are signs of God's special relationship with us. Baptism marks our entrance into the Christian family. The Lord's Supper is our means of being nourished and replenished in our lives as Christ's disciples.

SCRIPTURE

We come today to an important place in Luke's gospel, the celebration of the Passover meal—what we know as the Lord's Supper. Passover is a Jewish festival in which the people remember the beginning of the Hebrew Exodus from Egypt. The Hebrews were an immigrant population in Egypt that had been enslaved to labor in the great Egyptian construction projects of the day. With the help of God and the

leadership of Moses, they fled Egypt for a new land, a land promised to them by God. On the night before their escape from Egypt, the angel of death claimed the lives of the first-born sons of the Egyptians, but “passed over” the homes of the Hebrews. These were the homes that had been marked with the blood of a sacrificed lamb. Even today, the Passover meal recounts the events of that night.

In chapter 22, Luke announces that the festival of Passover has arrived—that day *on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed*. Jesus sends two of his disciples—Peter and John—with instructions to make preparations for the Passover meal. He instructs them to enter the city and they will be met by a man carrying a jar of water. Go with him to a house and say to the owner of the house, “The teacher asks you, ‘Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’” Then, the man will show you a large, upstairs room, already furnished. Make the preparations there. Peter and John experience everything as they have been told and they prepare for the meal.

Now, we’ve seen this before—Jesus with the arrangements. On entering Jerusalem, he sent disciples ahead to get the donkey. And back in chapter 9, Jesus sent people ahead of him to prepare for his arrival in various towns. I believe this again demonstrates the network of followers around Jesus—some, it would seem, beyond even the knowledge of his disciples.²

To fully prepare for the meal, Peter and John would need to gather the food. They would need to purchase a lamb, slaughter and roast it, buy unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and wine—all part of the ritual of the meal.

At the appointed time, Jesus and the rest of the disciples take their places at the table. Jesus tells them, *I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I die; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.*

Then taking a cup from the table, after giving thanks, Jesus 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 again gave thanks. Then he broke the bread and gave it to the disciples and said, *This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.*

And, following the meal, he took the cup, and said, *This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.*

Jesus has already told his followers that he is going to die, and that he will die in Jerusalem. I don’t know if they believed him or even understood his words, but for us today this is powerful knowledge, as it was for the disciples as they looked

² Note: It makes you wonder what the job of the disciples actually was. Were they not aware of these other people? Were the disciples so engaged in other tasks so that they didn’t know about these followers?

back, and as it was for Luke's congregation. In the act of breaking the bread and pouring the wine, Jesus claims the identity of the Passover lamb, the one sacrificed so that others may find freedom.

By becoming the sacrificial lamb, Jesus gives meaning to his death. His is not the death of an executed criminal, his is not the death of a martyr, he gives himself so that others may find new life, freedom, salvation. Just as the lamb's blood on the door posts marked freedom for the Hebrews, Jesus' blood is a marker of our salvation.

When we gather at this table, we are actively remembering, we are reliving the drama, we are enacting a promise.

The Lord's Supper is not rooted in this particular moment that we are at the table. In the Lord's Supper, we experience a fullness of time in which past, present, and future come together.

The Lord's Supper is a remembrance. Jesus said, *Do this in remembrance of me*. We are called to remember the past, the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, his sacrifice for us.

In the Lord's Supper, we celebrate the present renewal of God's covenant in Christ. Jesus said, *This is the new covenant in my blood*. Jesus is present within the meal.

And finally, we *proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*. As we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we anticipate a greater banquet in God's future kingdom. As Jesus says, *I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes*. We will gather at a great table with all the saints of all ages.

When we gather each month for the Lord's Supper, it is more than a simple ritual or liturgy, we are reliving a drama, we are participating in a promise. In this meal, the glory of God's new creation can be felt. It can be tasted. And it is good.