

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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MAUNDY THURSDAY



1 Corinthians 10

"Participation"

When we gather on a Maundy Thursday, we especially commemorate one event in Holy Week: what we often call "The Last Supper," the Passover meal that Jesus and the Apostles celebrated "on the night he was betrayed."

We commemorate it because in the course of that meal, Jesus took bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to his friends, saying "this is my body, which is given for you;" and at the end of the meal took a cup of wine saying "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for you." Though his friends must have been puzzled at his meaning, they did grasp his clear instruction: "Do this in remembrance of me."

And so Christians ever since have gathered to "remember the Lord" through the symbolic acts of eating and drinking bread and wine. The event was in the early days of the Church often called simply the "Breaking of Bread" and it appears to have been done frequently, and usually as part of a communal meal. In Paul's letters, he refers to Christians "coming together as a church... to eat the Lord's Supper." Elsewhere he calls it "having a part in the Lord's Table." Two other words soon emerged and later became widespread: from the prayers of Thanksgiving that were offered came the name the *Eucharist* (which is simply the Greek word meaning "to give thanks"); and

from the emphasis on participation and sharing in the memorial to Christ and in fellowship with one another came the term *Communion*. All these are Biblical terms, and all are still in use today, and each points to an important aspect of an action the Church came to call a "sacrament" - a symbolic act that carries a spiritual meaning.

Paul in his letter to the Corinthian church wants the fragmented Christians there to think about what they do in the Lord's Supper. The language he uses tells a lot about the way the Supper was viewed. First, he refers to "the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks." This is the primary focus: to remember with gratitude what Jesus has done for us. If we do not come with thanksgiving, we have missed a crucial aspect of the Supper. Of course it is only those who know they have something to be thankful for who should take part in the Lord's Supper. It is not for children or for unbelievers to participate in, although it may profit them to observe what is done. It is for those who give thanks for what Jesus has done for them.

Secondly, the "cup of thanksgiving" is, according to Paul, a "participation in the blood of Christ." This does not mean that the wine becomes his blood, but that the cup *signifies*, points to, is symbolic of, the "blood of the covenant" that Jesus shed. "This cup," he told them at the Last Supper, "is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out

for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus in his death inaugurated a new relationship between God and his people, and that includes a new covenant written on the heart, a new covenant where God will remember his people's sins no more, a new covenant sealed by the blood of Christ. To "participate in the blood of Christ" is to willingly enter the new covenant with God that Jesus offers; to share by faith the new life Jesus came to bring. It is therefore to enter into "communion" with Christ, to share with him, to embrace him.

The cup of wine is, then, "more than a symbol;" to drink it is a sign of being part the new covenant, to drink it is to be strengthened in our faith in Jesus, to be reassured about the security of our relationship to God, to be protected from doubt and fear in the face of evil and suffering, to have our consciences cleared by remembering that Christ has atoned for our sins. The sacrament is therefore "a means of grace" to us - it is more than a ritual, it is a way of receiving spiritual nourishment, it is a means for us to meet Jesus once again, because we sense his risen presence in a special way when we remember him, when we share in him, when we give thanks to him and for him in the Lord's Supper.

But there is a second aspect of the Supper that Paul emphasizes to the Corinthians: the "bread that we break" is *also* a "participation in the body of Christ" - more than a symbolic act, just as the wine is. We remember that his body was "broken for us." But in addition, Paul points to the "one loaf" as symbolic not only of Jesus' physical body, but also of the "body" that in Paul's language is always an expression for the Church. As Christians we are now, collectively, "the body of Christ," and to share in the bread broken from one loaf is to share also in the fellowship of the church.

Paul is so concerned about Christian fellowship that he devotes another long section of the Corinthian letter to it, telling the Christians that the way they come together to eat and celebrate the Lord's

Supper suggests they are losing sight of their communal relationship in the body. They are thoughtless, greedy, inconsiderate of others at the fellowship meal that precedes the "breaking of bread." In fact some people are getting drunk, while others go hungry! Some church feast, says Paul. Don't you realize who you are, what you are? You are the Body of Christ - act like it in the way you deal with one another!

So remember, says Paul to them and to us, that the bread we share symbolizes our shared life as a church. In our Congregational tradition, even the way we share it should remind us: for we believe it is appropriate to share the elements of the bread and wine with each other - we do not, for example, come forward to receive it from the hand of a minister. We share the bread and wine, as we say "ministering to one another" (serving each other) "in Jesus' name." So we are joined to one another, and our "communion" is not only with Jesus through faith, but with one another through service.

To "participate" in the Lord's Supper is therefore to make two recognitions, two remembrances: that Jesus has given his body and blood for you and for me, and we are thankful; and secondly that we are now bound together as his people - his body - by the faith in him that we share. The symbols to remind us and support us in grasping the truth that Christianity is *essentially* communal. We are not simply called to *personal* faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord (though we are that); but to membership in his *community* - his family, his kingdom, his people.

"Lone Ranger" Christianity has plagued Protestant and especially Evangelical Christianity for too long, with everyone pursuing his or her own "private religion." So we are too often weak, isolated, and ineffective in our world; we often lack direction, support, a sense of belonging, a sense of the common good, or of common faith. Even our own Congregational heritage has often degraded into the "right of

everyone to hold and express their own opinion," rather than the belief that "we are a community, bound together by a covenant of faith in Christ and love and service for one another." The Lord's Supper should call us all back to being a *church* – a called out people of God, not a voluntary association of religious individuals.

There is a prayer I sometimes use at Communion that ties together all the different things we should remember and notice: "Help us to *look back*, and remember your death for us on the cross; to *look up* and know you are the risen Savior in our midst; to *look around* and rejoice in our fellowship with one another; and finally to *look forward* in hope to the heavenly banquet when your kingdom comes."

So we will break bread, we will pour wine. What we do is symbolic, but it accomplishes something real: it refreshes our faith, it binds us together, it points us forward. For this we give thanks in the Eucharist, we share together in Communion, we join in a meal that is both festive and solemn, the *Lord's* Supper.

Let us pray...