

## Communion Every Lord's Day – Why?

Exodus 12:21-27; Luke 22:14-20; I Corinthians 11:23-26

You may have noticed that most of the major churches in this country and throughout the world are encouraging congregations to have a more frequent celebration of communion, the eucharist or the Lord's supper. An ecumenical consensus on this worship issue is emerging. Why? The purpose of this sermon is to answer the "Why?" The session of our church has determined that we will celebrate communion every Sunday in Advent/Lent, provided that I preach a sermon that explains the reasons for this change in our worship practice.

### BIBLICAL WARRANT

What does the Bible have to say about this? We have lots of instruction about worship practice in the Old Testament--plenty of detail about how the Passover should be celebrated and how sacrifices are to be made in the Jerusalem Temple. Even the color of the priest's robe is specified--blue (Exodus 28:31).

But when we come to the New Testament there is nothing like that kind of detailed instruction for Christian worship. That has an advantage; there is much more latitude for creativity and experimentation. We may assume that since the first Christians were all Jews that they carried over some of the features of local synagogue worship into Christian churches--such as the reading of the Scriptures and a sermon which goes on in Jewish synagogues to this day.

But we have to be careful because we do not have a concrete example of a full synagogue service from the first century. In chapter 4 of Luke's gospel Jesus did read from the scriptures and preached a sermon--that explains why scripture and sermon are integral to Christian worship today--precedent counts.

But when it comes to holy communion our sources are suggestive rather than definitive. Acts chapter 20:7 reads, "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them..." This suggests that the Christians gathered for communion and Paul's sermon. Possibly, we have an instance of a early worship service that included the preaching of the Word and communion.

But that weak evidence for a frequent celebration of communion is supported by the IMPORTANCE of communion for the early Christian community. Three gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke all give an account of Jesus meeting in the upper room before his death and resurrection and record Jesus' words over the bread and wine, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

And Paul in I Corinthians evidently thinks that the practice of communion in the church in Corinth is deficient in some way; so he gives them specific instructions as to how to proceed. "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The celebration of

communion is a proclamation of the gospel--in words, and also by sight, touch and taste.

It seems evident that communion is important for the well-being of the Christian community. They had better get it right in Corinth! And because communion proclaims the central meaning of salvation through the life death and resurrection of Christ--what could be more important than that for the life of the church?

#### HISTORICAL PRECEDENT

Nevertheless, the presentation of worship in the New Testament is still sketchy and we have to rely on later developments which may illuminate earlier practice. We have a record of Christian worship at about 150A.D. from Justin Martyr who records the weekly practice of Christians gathering on Sunday when the "memoirs of the apostles" are read, "and when we have finished the prayer, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president likewise sends up prayers and thanksgiving according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen." (from Paul F. Bradshaw, *Eucharistic Origins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 p. 62)

According to this account communion was a regular part of Sunday worship.

Why don't we have better records from early church history? Remember there was intermittent persecution of Christians in the early centuries, and there was no printing press. We are fortunate to have what we have.

As time went on some unfortunate practices arose so that in Medieval Europe the people received communion once a year. John Calvin in Geneva in the 16<sup>th</sup> century lamented this practice of infrequent communion and proposed that the church reformed should celebrate communion every Sunday. When he tried to persuade the city officials that this was proper, he was forced to accept their ruling that communion could take place only quarterly or four times a year. Calvin, the so-called autocrat of Geneva couldn't even get his way on a purely ecclesiastical matter.

In his major theological work, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he wrote: "[Communion] was ordained to be frequently used among all Christians in order that they might frequently return in memory to Christ's passion, by such remembrance to sustain and strengthen their faith..." John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) IV.xvii, 44.

In sum, Calvin's reform did not succeed, and generations of Presbyterians got stuck in the practice of communion once a quarter or more recently, once a month, as is our current practice. On this issue the Presbyterian church has been taking little baby steps toward more frequent communion.

But guess what? The Roman Catholic Church which had been stingily

withholding communion from the faithful for centuries has done an about face. As far back as December 20 in 1905 Pope Pius X issued instructions that communion be celebrated frequently in the Roman community. We Presbyterians are in the awkward position of espousing the reform of frequent communion but have been upstaged by the Roman Catholic Church for more than a hundred years!

## PRACTICAL MATTERS

Biblical, and historical precedent are not the only considerations. There are practical reasons for encouraging a more frequent celebration of communion. Let me enumerate a few:

1. We Presbyterians have allowed our worship to get out of balance. We are striving to have a balance between the Word and read and preached and the celebration of communion--a balance between Word and Sacrament. We have so emphasized the preaching of the Word that it dominates our worship. Good sermons build up the faith of the congregation. They really do. I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe that. "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." (Romans 10:17 RSV)

But you know what? This is a secret just between us. Shh! Not all sermons are good! I'll bet you didn't know that. It must come as a shock to you. You heard it first from me.

Once I was doing an interim at a little church north of New York City--a place called Portchester. They had a magnificent manse with a large basement. I put my boxes of sermons and journals on the basement floor and happened to ask an elder. "Does this basement ever flood in a heavy rain?"

"Oh, no" he said. "It has never happened."

So help me it must have rained for forty days and forty nights. The basement flooded and my treasure trove of old sermons got soaking wet, and I had to lay them out on the floor of a classroom building to dry out. And one day I went into the room to see how they were doing, and began to read one after the other, and I know you won't believe this, but I said to myself, "How could you, Stuart, have the temerity, the audacity to inflict these wretched sermons on those poor people?"

But there is a remedy at hand. It has to do with the service of holy communion. Have you noticed that the prayers used at holy communion contain a recitation of the Gospel. Here is just one brief excerpt from our communion liturgy in our Book of Common Worship: "You are holy, O God of majesty, and blessed is Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. You sent your only-begotten, in whom your fullness dwells, to be for us the way, the truth, and the life."

There's more. The whole history of salvation from creation to our final banquet in the kingdom of God are traced in the communion prayers so that whatever deficiencies there might be in the sermon are balanced by the gospel in

the form of prayer.

Now I know that prayers in a fixed liturgy can become mechanical and rote, but so can hymns and even the Lord's prayer. Care must be taken to allow for the spontaneity of the Spirit.

Maybe you noticed in that quote from Justin Martyr that "the president likewise sends up prayers and thanksgiving according to his ability,...." indicating that the pastor's prayers at communion can be extemporaneous, and include the current needs of the people.

Also remember that Paul may have sent his specific instruction to the Christians in Corinth because their worship lacked stability and was overly spontaneous and their communion needed to be done "decently and in order" as we Presbyterians like to put it.

I do note that our communion liturgy has a prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of freedom and spontaneous worship. "Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these your gifts of bread and wine..." Again, we strive for a balance between good order and spontaneity.

2. Why have we Presbyterians been so slow to move toward a more frequent celebration of communion? There are several reasons:

A. We get stuck in a pattern of behavior and don't want to change. We fail to take a moment and ask a very simple question? What is important in our worship? If communion is important then we need to make room for it.

Sometimes the clergy say to themselves: "Hey, in order to keep this church going I need to push programs that meet people's immediate needs. We need to put our energy into Christian education--young families want that. We need to put our best people on the Stewardship committee so we raise the money we need to do what we need to do. Changes in worship just rock the boat with no payback." The clergy have been timid.

B. We have allowed "fillers" to usurp communion. Long announcements, and in some congregations the music program is so elaborate that the tail wags the dog. Because of our cultural habit of one hour for worship we may feel that communion would cramp our style and we won't get out in time to beat the other churches to brunch.

C. Don't misunderstand. I love good church music. We need to use our grand tradition of congregational singing to pull our communion service out of its funereal solemnity. Communion is not a "funeral service for Jesus." If the people come forward for communion we can begin with silence, sing a meditative hymn that focuses on the Cross of Jesus or our commitment to Him, and then follow that with a hymn that has a joyful Resurrection theme. The people waiting to come forward and the people who have already received are free to sing from the pews.

If communion is in the pew, the congregation may learn some simple hymns by heart so that they are comfortable holding the elements. I participated in a communion service in Jamaica where the people knew the hymns by heart.

D. And then there is the old chestnut: "If we celebrate communion every Sunday, it won't be "special." Well, communion certainly is special. Jesus said so. But we could have a sermon once a month, or a prayer once a month, or a hymn once a month, wouldn't that be "special." We could fast and eat a meal once a month and that would be so special we might not survive.

Communion is for our spiritual nourishment. By coming to communion regularly we remember the life, death and resurrection of our Lord. By the Holy Spirit we encounter the living Christ who sustains our faith as we receive the bread and wine, and by our union with Christ we bond with each other in love.

Again, why are we moving so slowly, cautiously, haltingly toward a more frequent celebration of communion? I remember some play or movie in which a person had been wandering in the desert for days, but was finally rescued. The physician would only allow the poor wretch to slowly suck on

a wet cloth to get water, and the food was just barely enough. Why so slow? Too much water and rich food might so shock the system that the poor fellow could die from the sudden intrusion of food and water.

We are moving slowly toward frequent communion in our church so that our people may gradually and safely, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN

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