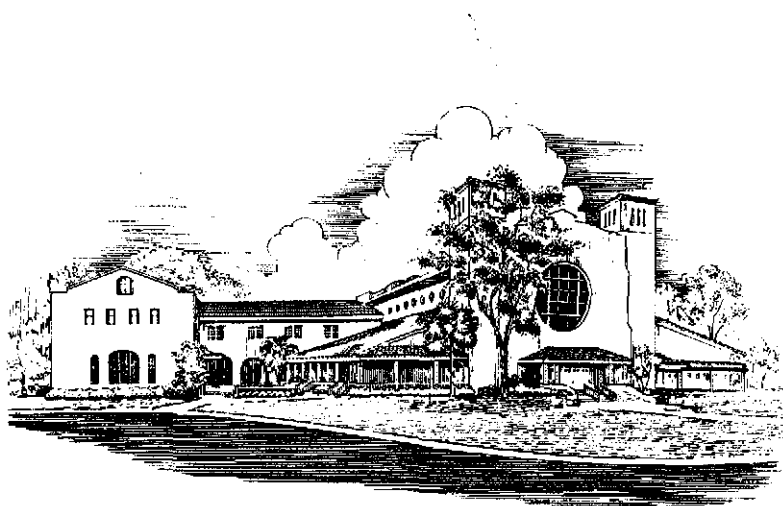


First Church Pulpit

**"IF THE ELDER MISSED YOUR PEW. . .
A Theology of the Sacrament"**

Text: "This is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." [Corinthians 11:24



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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It happened one day, twelve or fifteen years ago, in another parish far away, when we were celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion. The problem was, as you could guess from the title of our sermon, that the Elder serving Communion on one of the south transept aisles inadvertently missed a pew. I don't know why: perhaps he was confused or nervous, but the tray with the glasses of wine was never passed that way. Why someone did not call out to him, I do not know. But after the service a young woman came to me at the door in tears. I said, "What's wrong?" "I didn't get my wine," she said, looking lost. So I walked her over to the kitchenette, got the chalice, went back into the church, sat her down, said a prayer and gave her the bread and wine. The tears went away immediately, and she left in smiles.

Now on the way home I wondered why the others in her pew had not come forward; they had missed their wine too. My young friend felt cheated out of her rightful gift of sacramental grace. She believed that however nice the service, however great the music, however sweet the sermon, if she did not get to ingest the bread and wine herself, something sacred and special was missing from her life. She believed in the power of the sacrament to impute its sacramental grace, which our theology teaches comes at no other time in no other way.

Another time I heard about a church up in Ohio where those who prepared the bread and grape juice (unfermented wine we call it) had not prepared enough; or else by some surprise far more people came than ever came before, but they ran out before the entire congregation was served. Obviously a whole back section of the church got no Communion that day. There was disappointment I was told, but no uproar ... Yet both of these situations bother me.

My question to you my friends today is this: Did the ones who received the bread and wine get anything more of

Substance and Grace than the people who did not. Does something special and irreplaceable happen when we partake of the elements? With that question, we are in the heartland of the theology of the sacraments. What happens when we take Communion?

Presbyterianism and most of the major Protestant churches celebrate two sacraments. The Roman Catholic and some other churches have seven. Ours are the sacrament of Baptism and Holy Communion. We say that both of those were commanded by Christ. Without His command there is no sacrament. The Roman Catholic Church adds confirmation, confession, ordination, marriage, and extreme unction, or last rites. Obviously all five of those are part of the ministry of our church too, but Calvin and Luther and others noted at the time of the Reformation that those five, however holy, were not response to specific commandments of Jesus Christ. We call them Ordinances of the Church.

John Calvin, the founder of Presbyterianism defined "sacrament" as an outward sign of an inward grace; that is, the bread and the wine and the water of baptism are the outward signs. The inward grace is what happens inside the soul and body of the person when they are administered. Calvin said it was a mystery known alone to God as to why He chooses to do it the way He does.

So, the answer to my hypothetical question as to whether you have missed something if you fail to take the elements of bread and wine depends on what you believe. A Roman Catholic priest would tell you yes, you miss the grace, if you do not come forward and receive the wafer and wine. That doctrine is called Transubstantiation: that means the bread becomes the actual body of our Lord, and the wine

becomes the actual blood. They transubstantiate, i.e., they become different substances. That is why you will notice that the priest drinks all of the remaining consecrated wine. One dare not discard the blood of Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther taught a doctrine called Consubstantiation. That means in Latin that grace comes with the elements, but the bread and wine are not transformed. Most of these differences date to the Reformation time. A Lutheran pastor would tell you that if you fail to take the sacraments you would miss the Grace of Christ that is there. Wars were fought over how the Sacrament was celebrated.

A third theology of the sacraments calls it a memorial service. Largely in the Baptist and free churches, it is taught that the Communion experience is celebrated in memory of Christ to recall His sacrifice. The bread and wine are nice little reminders as it were, that He gave His life, but nothing at all happens to the elements themselves. You simply have a symbol of what Jesus was and did. In that tradition you would miss nothing significant if the server should miss your pew.

Finally there is the Presbyterian and Reformed approach. John Calvin set a major portion of the doctrine, when he taught that a Divine Mystery is present. Calvin believed that if the heart of the believer is in tune, if God has spoken to the person and awakened faith in Christ, then the ordinary bread and wine become extraordinary; the natural becomes supernatural. Presbyterians have long believed that if the Elder missed your pew you surely miss something; not the literal blood and body of Christ, but a grace that comes in no other way in no other place. If you participate in Holy Communion, believing that in response to your faith, Christ will enter in, then you receive the sacramental gift. But you will receive it only if you take the bread and wine. Without the elements, there is no sacramental grace imparted.

The word "sacrament" comes from Latin. It originally meant a pledge, or an oath. It came to mean the gift God gives to seal in us the promise of the Gospel. It is obviously related to the word "sacred". It concentrates something very much more widespread. The whole universe is sacred and sacramental, in that it offers us signs and seals of God's gifts for our lives. In The Idea of The Holy, old Rudolph Otto used to say (Archbishop William Temple would agree), that all of God's creation is holy or none of it is. "Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory." Baillie wrote about "The Sacramental Universe."

We believe that what is available everywhere, in you, in us, in the church, in nature, in goals, in disappointment, the Grace of God is there - but in this sacrament it is undiluted, concentrated, and available.

We speak of Sacramental Grace. Grace is also a Latin word: "gratia," which means charm or loveliness. It is a translation from the Hebrew word "hen" which literally means favor, like a favor you do for someone else when you give someone a gift: a gift of love, or a gift of yourself, or of forgiveness, or just a plain old birthday gift. God does a favor for us in Communion. In the New Testament the Greek word used is strictly theological. It refers to the gift of God's redeeming love, the gift of His forgiveness in Christ, the gift of His presence which upholds and strengthens you in your time of need. So when we say sacramental grace, we mean the spiritual gift of God which comes when you take Communion.

A generation ago German theologian Paul Tillich referred to the "death of the sacraments." Scottish Professor, Donald Baillie, warned a little while later that since we have

all become fuzzy in our attitude and approach to communion, "It is time for some hard theological thinking," he said. I hope you are ready for some hard theological thought.

"In my Scottish Presbyterian tradition," Dr. Baillie continued in his book titled The Theology of The Sacraments, "the sacrament means far less to our grandchildren that it did to our grandfathers." The Communion Season in Scotland used to be a great and solemn occasion. It had a dominating importance. It was so sacred that for centuries it was a "closed communion": i.e., only those who had gone to the Wednesday evening Preparatory Service, the week before, could come on Sunday. At the Wednesday service they received a Communion Token. One had to present the token to be admitted to the Sunday service of Holy Communion. That exclusive attitude towards communion was brought over to this country, and continued. Even when I was a boy, and on into my teen years, in our conservative United Presbyterian Church of North America, everyone was expected to be at the Preparatory Service so that we could prepare ourselves to take Communion. It was a serious venture in our house. By the way I still have some Communion Tokens from mid Nineteenth Century Scotland, collectors items to be sure.

Most people know that for centuries in the Roman Catholic Church one had to go to confession on Saturday and be absolved of sins by the priest, before they could take communion at the Sunday Mass.

In recent years in our Presbyterian tradition we have moved away from that solemnity. Here in Fort Lauderdale, which draws so many people to enjoy the weather in the winter, there is even less attachment to the dignity and centrality of the sacrament. One local pastor told me "It is a little add-on, they don't want to be serious at the shore." I told him they needed it more than we do.

Personally, I believe in Calvin's theology. I see no need to take a transubstantiated actual body and blood of Christ. The one sacrifice on the cross was sufficient. My main objection to the Commemorative view is that I like to concentrate not so much on what we do in Communion to remember Christ, but that He remembers us. He does. He invites us to His table to sup with Him. That is as true every time we take the bread and the wine together as it was the night of the first Last Supper. He was there then; He is here now. He offered them His body and His blood then; He offers it anew to us for the forgiveness of our sins. It brought them closer to Christ, to share a sacramental meal, and it brings Him closer to us today. It is a remembrance, but it is more...

The first Communion was on the evening of His arrest and betrayal, Thursday before Good Friday. They met for the Passover meal, which also had bread and wine. Jesus transformed it into a personal memorial to him. But at first it was simply a meal together...

What happened there at the first institution of the Holy Eucharist happened in one way or another every time that Jesus sat down to eat with his followers. He raised the level of an ordinary meal to a time of monumental significance and unbounded celebration. Let me give you some examples:

Remember the day when out on the hillside, 5,000 people gathered to hear him teach and to see some miracles. They were so excited they wouldn't go away. The day drew on, the hour grew late, and there was no food around. A little boy was there with five loaves and two fishes. The disciples were discouraged but Jesus said, "Bring the loaves and fish to

me," and He performed a miracle at that meal, so much so that everyone was fed and there were baskets and baskets left over.

Now do not be bothered on the how and why He did what He did. That is dead-end territory. You will miss the message of it all. In symbol the meal with the 5,000 means that whatever you bring to Jesus, however small and insignificant it seems, he will prepare a lavish meal for you. He will take whatever you bring and expand it and glorify it and give you back out of the goodness of His heart, a thousandfold and more. A meal with Jesus is always a miracle.

Then remember the feast the loving father threw for his son the night the boy came home from a far country where he had squandered his inheritance and ended up feeding the pigs. He had made a mess of his life, as many do, so he decided to go home to dear old dad. His brother who had kept the farm and helped the father was angry as could be when the father got so excited when the little renegade came home. "You never threw a feast for me!" he said, so jealous he could spit, or scream. The father said, "I had lost this boy and now he is found. He is your brother, why can't you rejoice?" And the father threw the biggest party that whole town had ever seen. They laughed and danced all through the dinner.

(Are you listening?) At the table of the father, the sacramental table, there are no requirements of godliness, success, or strength. There are no restrictions on who Christ invites; or there shouldn't be, even if many times in many places good Christians have tried to exclude, and still do, the people they do not like. One day a woman said to me, "He cheated on his wife. Why would you let him take the sacrament?" I said, "I don't know about that, but I know that Christ forgives, even if you cannot. He is welcome at this table. All must repent ... remember how the pastor used to say, "If you have a grievance with a brother or sister, go and

settle it; for you must not seek to commune with Christ if you are not at peace with others in His world.

In I Corinthians 11:23-29, we find the Words of Institution of the Sacrament, delivered by Paul. Then in 11:27, we read: "Whoever, therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup."

You are welcome here my friend. Examine yourself and present yourself to Christ. That is what it is all about. He came to heal and to love, to forgive and to accept you. He invites you to sit down and have this little meal with Him, and he will give you all you need.

Twice, following His resurrection, Jesus ate with His disciples. One we talked about not long ago on the shores of Galilee. The other was Easter night over in Emmaus, seventeen miles away. Two dejected followers had been walking down the road. The Resurrected Jesus joined them; but they did not know that it was Jesus ... until they got there. They went inside the house. Luke writes: "He went in to sit with them. When he was at table He took the bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them and their eyes were opened and ... they recognized Him ..."

Maybe you too have had trouble through the years recognizing Jesus along your road. Maybe you feel it just now when you cannot quite make out just where He is. Maybe when you have been confused by the turn of events in your life. Maybe you have walked away too far. Maybe you have allowed the debris of all the other things you have done to cover His offer over, I don't know.

But I do know this: in the gift of this sacrament, Christ

will open up your eyes again and you will see Him face to face. He is here. In the consecration of these ordinary elements something extraordinary will happen to you if you let it. That's Calvin again. Your faith as a believer will make it all come true. So take this bread and drink this cup and ponder anew what Christ has done, will do, can do, for you and me, for now and evermore.

Amen.