



1st United Methodist Church

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The Sacrament of Holy Communion

A sermon preached by Dr. Harold Henderson at a Service of Holy Communion on Sunday, February 1, 2009.

My concern in this sermon is to address some of the misconceptions sometimes apparent in our approach to the Table of the Lord in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, not so much in relation to the theological differences various traditions hold, but in relation to our attitudes as we approach the Holy Table.

From God's side, the Sacrament of Holy Communion is a means of grace. It is a special way, given to us by our Lord himself, in which God reaches out to us to touch and bless our lives by the transforming power of his presence among us. It is true that God is present with us always and everywhere, but there is a special sense, perhaps a mystical sense, in which God comes to us in Holy Communion that is more profound than the general sense of God's presence.

From our side, then, approaching the Table of the Lord is a response to the initiative of Divine grace. The question we want to address today is how we should approach the Holy Table in an appropriate way and avoid doing so in the "unworthy manner" to which the Apostle Paul refers (1 Corinthians 11:27 NRSV).

To help us in this important process, I have chosen seven words that illuminate what the Sacrament of Holy Communion is, from our side.

1. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is an Act of Obedience. Jesus said: "Do this..." (1 Corinthians 11: 24 and 25 NRSV). Jesus did not add, "if you feel like it" or "when you get around to it" or "when you feel good enough." He said: "Do this..."

If you are motivated, as I'm sure you are, to walk the pathway of obedience to Christ, the Sacrament of Holy Communion is a good place to start.

2. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is an Act of Remembrance. "Do this in remembrance of me," Jesus went on to say (1 Corinthians 11: 24 and 25 NRSV). The Sacrament of Holy Communion is not a place to parade your sins, or to bury yourself beneath a load of guilt. It is certainly not a place from which to stay away because you don't feel good enough. Our focus in coming to the Table of the Lord is not on ourselves, but on the Christ whose invitation brings us here.

3. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is an Act of Thanksgiving. We are all familiar with the phrase, "an attitude of gratitude," so familiar, in fact, that the phrase has become hackneyed and even trite but, if ever there was a place where it is totally appropriate and applicable, it is at the Table of the Lord. We come thankfully and out of deep gratitude to

the Christ “who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20 NRSV). The hymn-writer, Philip Bliss, said it well when he wrote 133 years ago:

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
in my place condemned he stood;
Sealed my pardon with his blood.
Hallelujah! What a Savior!
(UMH # 165).

4. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is an Act of Unity or Togetherness. Paul stressed this when he wrote to the Corinthian Christians: “Because there is one loaf, we who are many (and, by inference, different) are one body for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Corinthians 10:17 NRSV). The Table of the Lord is no place for divisiveness. Here we are united to Christ and to each other. It is to dramatize the call to unity that we use one loaf and one cup (rather than many cups and many wafers) in our celebration of Holy Communion.

5. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is an Act of Sharing. Again Paul expresses this in vivid terms when he asks the rhetorical questions: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Corinthians 10:16 NRSV). What a powerful way to speak of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It is more than an act of memory of something done

for us centuries ago (though it is that). It is a sharing in the body and blood of Christ.

6. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is an Act of Contrition. The Table of the Lord is no place for arrogance, or pride, or boastfulness, or smugness, or judgment on each other. It is like sacred ground that we approach with humble and contrite hearts. Isaac Watts, probably the father of congregational hymn singing in the English-speaking world, said it well 302 years ago:

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.
(UMH # 298, 299).

7. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is an Act of Self-Giving. This happens to be the case on God’s side as well as on ours. As we share together in our Communion liturgy this morning, we will pray: “May this bread and this cup be to us the body and blood of Christ that we may be to the world the body of Christ redeemed by his blood.” (UMH: “A Service of Word and Table 1” - p.10.) As we come to the Table of the Lord, we are committing ourselves to being the body, the hands and feet, the eyes and ears, the heart, of Christ for a broken and hurting world.