

Maundy Thursday—A
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Remember Jesus' Promises in Holy Communion

A little girl was sitting next to her parents in the church. She watched as people quietly filed forward. They stopped at the rail in front of the church. Then, when the pastor motioned with his hand, they all kneeled down. Each person took a little piece of bread and a small cup of wine. The pastor spoke some words, ending with “depart in peace,” and everyone got up and walked back to their seats. Another group moved forward and did the same thing.

Finally the little girl's parents stood up. They too walked forward to kneel, eat the bread, and drink the wine. After the pastor spoke, her parents return to their seats. “Mommy,” whispered the little girl, “Why do you go up front and eat that piece of bread and drink a sip of wine?”

That is a good question, don't you think? Why do we do that? Why have Christians throughout the ages gathered regularly to receive a small piece of bread and drink a sip of wine? I suppose there are a number of ways to answer that question. One way is to say that we are remembering the Lord's promises. You see, Jesus made some very special promises and connected them to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Tonight we will consider those promises. We will do that with this simple sermon theme: Remember Jesus' promises in Holy Communion.

I. Jesus promises his body and blood with the bread and the wine.

The apostle Paul recounts for us what Jesus said. Paul writes, “*The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you.’*” The Lord continued by taking the cup of wine, offering it to the disciples, and saying, “*This cup is the new covenant in my blood.*” What do our Lord's words clearly say there? Jesus promises to give his body and blood with the bread and the wine.

When Jesus instituted the Sacrament, he gave the disciples bread and wine. They were at the dinner table, celebrating the Passover. Jesus picked up some of the food that was on the table and gave it to his followers. When the disciples took it in their hands and placed it into their mouths, they tasted bread. And when they raised the cup to their lips and drank, they drank wine. No magical change had taken place. The bread did not cease to be bread, nor the wine cease to be wine. Peter, Andrew, James, John, and all the others actually ate bread and drank wine.

But along with those earthly elements came Jesus' body and blood. The Lord made that clear when he said, “*This is my body... this is my blood.*” Those words were understood by the apostles to mean that the celebration of the Lord's Supper was a reception of the body and blood of Jesus in a real sense. Consider the inspired words of explanation recorded in 1 Corinthians. There we read, “*Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?*” (1 Corinthians 10:16). When those early believers gathered for the Lord's Supper, they understood that they were actually partaking of the body and blood of Christ.

We read similar words a little later in 1 Corinthians. God's Word says, “*Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself*” (1 Corinthians 11:29). God's people were to recognize that in the Sacrament they did receive

more than mere bread and wine. The promise of Jesus was clear. Bread and wine, along with body and blood—all four—are present in the Lord's Supper.

Many have often asked, "How can this be? How can we actually receive the Lord's body and blood along with the bread and wine?" It seems impossible for body and blood and bread and wine to occupy the same space at the time we receive Holy Communion. We cannot penetrate it, logically dissect it, thoroughly comprehend it, and put it back together again. But we believe this because it is what the Lord teaches. He says so. He promises, "*This is my body and blood.*" Because of his words, by faith we believe it to be the absolute truth.

The disciples did not know how it could be possible either. But one thing they did know: Jesus promised to give them his body and blood with the bread and wine. Because of the Lord's words, because of Jesus' promise, they believed it and remembered it every time they gathered for Holy Communion.

So it is with us. As we come forward tonight to receive the bread and wine, we want to remember the Lord's promise. Jesus, the one who cannot lie, tells us that we are receiving bread and wine. There can be no doubt about that. You and I will taste bread and wine. But, more importantly, we receive his body and blood. It does not matter how long it has been since Jesus actually shed his blood on the cross. It does not matter how many times the Sacrament has been celebrated over the centuries. It does not matter how the rest of the world may snicker at this sacrament. People who are not Christians will say, "You actually believe that? How silly. Take this to any lab in the country and have it analyzed. You will find that it is bread and wine." The non-Christian cannot accept the teaching of the real presence of Jesus' body and blood. It seems like utter foolishness to them. But you and I, by God's grace, believe. We know that the Lord's promises are trustworthy.

"Why do we eat that little piece of bread and drink a little wine?" The answer to that question lies in one more promise that our Jesus gives to all those who kneel down here and faithfully receive this Sacrament. And that's the promise of forgiveness.

II. Jesus promise to give forgiveness in the Sacrament.

Jesus told the disciples that his blood was "*poured out... for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matthew 26:28). In those words he promised the disciples that their sins would be forgiven. The Lord actually offered forgiveness through this sacrament.

Let's think about the word "*forgiveness*" for a moment. A number of Greek words can be translated with the English word "forgive." The word before us tonight speaks of being released from some obligation. The Bible story that I believe best illustrates this concept of release is the parable of the unmerciful servant. Do you remember that parable? In that parable, Jesus taught that a servant owed his master a large sum of money, about twelve million dollars! The debt was so large that the servant had no hope whatsoever of paying it back. This fellow was a lousy and unfaithful servant to run up a debt like this. Now this servant pleaded with the master to give him a little time and he'd pay him back. The master knew this was impossible and there wasn't one good thing about this servant that would have made this master feel sorry for him and the predicament he had gotten himself into. But in mercy, this master releases this unworthy servant from this entire obligation. The Bible says: "*The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt, and let him go*" (Matthew 18:27). There was no longer a connection between the obligation and the servant.

This same release is what happened the night of the first Holy Communion. When Jesus

told the disciples that his body and blood were being given for the forgiveness of sins, he offered the disciples release from their obligation. What obligation? The obligation to stand before God on judgment day and be held accountable for their sin. What a dreadful obligation: to stand before the judge of the universe and have the evidence of an entire life of sin presented in an instant—to know there are no excuses, to understand that the wages due for those sins is eternity in hell. What a horrifying obligation. Jesus promised the disciples that, in Holy Communion, they were released from that obligation.

How can Holy Communion do such a great thing? Because it proclaims the Lord's death. It says to those who receive it, "Jesus gave his body to suffering and death, and shed his blood to pay for your sins. You are forgiven." Several years ago a Christian missionary in India had a conversation with a Hindu priest. This member of a major non-Christian religion said to the missionary: "Tell me one thing your religion can offer the people of this country that mine can't." The missionary thought for but a moment and then he replied: "Forgiveness!" Forgiveness! Unlike the followers of all other world religions, those who put their trust in Jesus Christ as Savior have this full assurance that all their sins are forgiven. The search for forgiveness ends when you find Christ. As we find him here in, with, and under the bread and wine, we will also find his forgiveness! You see, Jesus' words give those simple elements of Holy Communion the power to forgive. We may not understand this either, but our Jesus says it is so, and so we believe it.

Tonight many of us will come up here, kneel down, and participate in the Lord's Supper. We bring with us all that is wrong with our lives. Daily and ugly sins which have brought sorrow and guilt into all of our lives. Daily and ugly sins for which there are no excuses and for which we have no solutions. But do not despair. Your Savior, Jesus, is waiting for you here. Jesus promises you that when you receive his body and blood with faith you will also receive the forgiveness of sins. What joy there is in store for us tonight. What blessed assurance is waiting for us here. We have been released from the guilt and eternal responsibility of our sins. We will not stand before God to be held accountable for our sins. We have been released from that obligation. The Lord's Supper brings this release to us because it still proclaims the death of the Lord for our sins. Remember this promise of Jesus as you partake of his Supper.

I sometimes wonder if, on non-Communion Sundays, after the pastor has absolved our sins "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," someone might be thinking to himself, "Yes, Pastor, you have forgiven the sins of many people in this building. But if you knew my sins, you would not say that to me." That can't be said on a Communion Sunday. When our Lord Jesus, by the hand of the pastor, places his body and blood into your mouth, there can be no mistake whose sins the pastor is talking about. Christ is, in effect, saying to you, "I mean you when I say '*given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins.*' How can you tell? I, Jesus Christ, place my body and blood in to your mouth. You are a beloved child of the heavenly Father because of what I have done here."

The Apostle Paul tells us of one more promise that we do not regularly tie together with Holy Communion. Paul says that in the Lord's Supper we "*Proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*" That means we confess that Jesus is the only Savior there is and he has died for us, but please also notice those words "*until he comes.*"

As we receive Holy Communion tonight, we are only one group of Christians that has found forgiveness and strength in the Sacrament. Throughout the past centuries, from the time of the disciples until now, God has forgiven and strengthened believers through the Sacrament. When we are all gone, the Sacrament will still bring those blessings to believers—to our children

and their children and the generations after them, until the Lord comes.

Those simple words “*until he comes*” remind us that the Lord will return to take us to himself in heaven. This Sacrament points us to our future. That future is the heaven that our Jesus will one day share with us forever.

So what is going on here at Holy Communion? Why do Christians gather regularly for this Supper? What can a parent say to a child who asks, “Mommy, why do you go up front to eat a small piece of bread and drink a sip of wine?” To that question we might well respond, “We do it to remember Jesus’ promises.” He has promised to give us his body and blood with the bread and wine. He has also promised to forgive all our sins in Communion. Then, as we receive the Sacrament, we are assured that the Lord has also promised to come back to get us and take us home with him. Amen.