

## God's Time

9<sup>th</sup> Weekend of Kingdomtide – August 5/6, 2006

### Sermon Background Study

1 Corinthians 11:17-28 (The Message)

Regarding this next item, I'm not at all pleased. I am getting the picture that when you meet together it brings out your worst side instead of your best! First, I get this report on your divisiveness, competing with and criticizing each other. I'm reluctant to believe it, but there it is. The best that can be said for it is that the testing process will bring truth into the open and confirm it.

And then I find that you bring your divisions to worship—you come together, and instead of eating the Lord's Supper, you bring in a lot of food from the outside and make pigs of yourselves. Some are left out, and go home hungry. Others have to be carried out, too drunk to walk. I can't believe it! Don't you have your own homes to eat and drink in? Why would you stoop to desecrating God's church? Why would you actually shame God's poor? I never would have believed you would stoop to this. And I'm not going to stand by and say nothing.

Let me go over with you again exactly what goes on in the Lord's Supper and why it is so centrally important. I received my instructions from the Master himself and passed them on to you. The Master, Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said,

This is my body, broken for you.  
Do this to remember me.

After supper, he did the same thing with the cup:

This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you.  
Each time you drink this cup, remember me.

What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt.

Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Master irreverently is like part of the crowd that jeered and spit on him at his death. Is that the kind of "remembrance" you want to be part of? Examine your motives, test your heart, come to this meal in holy awe.

*What is really happening when we gather for the Lord's Supper? Are we merely recalling and reflecting on Jesus' sacrificial death? Or is there something more going on?*

In the first decades of Christianity, when the followers of Jesus gathered they shared a meal. For some, it was probably the best meal they got all week. It is clear from Paul's scolding of the Corinthian Christians that they often forgot why they shared this meal that Jesus had given them. Some ate like gluttons. Some even got drunk. And, worst of all, some were excluded from the meal. I haven't seen anyone ever stagger away from our Holy Communion at St. Andrew, but I wonder how much thought we ourselves give to what is really happening when we eat the bread and drink from the cup.

A bridge

Christians are all over the place when it comes to Holy Communion. We all (or at least, most) affirm that it is breathtakingly significant, But ask "What is really happening?" and you'll get a lot of answers. Scripture doesn't help much here. What exactly did Jesus mean when he said "This is my body . . . this is my blood?" or "Do this in remembrance of me." The disciples were perplexed and so are we.

In keeping with John Wesley, Methodists are theologians of the middle. We are a bridging church. This reflects our roots in the Church of England, which, during the Protestant reformation, sought to hold together those who wanted to stay with Rome and those who sought a return to "primitive" Christianity

#### Time

Many Christians don't realize that God expects us to use our imaginations, to think big, to be open to surprising truths and perplexing mysteries about the nature of reality. Take time for example. As Augustine famously put it, everyone knows what time is until they are asked to define it.

We are now a century past Einstein's publication of his first papers on relativity. If we thought we knew what time was pre-Einstein, what do we think now. According to his theories, which have been borne out, time passes more slowly for an astronaut circling the earth at high speed than it does for us on the ground. The astronaut's "after" is my "before."

I don't really know what to make of all that but it has relieved me of much theological angst. Questions like, "Did God choose me *before* I chose God," fade off into irrelevance. If the astronaut's "before" and my "before" aren't the same, why should I assume that "before" and "after" have any fixed meaning with God.

Thus, we can embrace the UMC claim that Holy Communion "becomes representation of past gracious acts of God in the present, so powerfully as to make them truly present now." The notion that we are stepping out of our time and into God's time may tax our imaginations, but it is one we can hold with confidence.

(the Puritans, for example). We see this Methodist (and Anglican) commitment to finding the middle way, the *via media*, in many areas of Christian doctrine and practice, including our understanding of Holy Communion.<sup>1</sup> Since we are searching for the middle way, let's look at the two extremes.

### *Rome and Zwingli*

In the text box below, I've tried to summarize the Roman Catholic view of Communion, namely, that by consecrating the elements (the bread and wine), they become the body and blood of Christ. For a Catholic, when Jesus said, "This is my body," he meant just that. But many Protestant reformers challenged that understanding. One, Huldrych Zwingli, held that the Lord's Supper is merely a symbolic meal, a recalling or memorial of the Last Supper. Remembrance, then, becomes no more than recollection. Many Baptist and similar denominations hold this Zwinglian view.

You can see how these differing views would lead to very different practices. Daily Mass by Roman Catholics is understandable since they believe the Mass makes Christ physically present. Likewise, if Communion is no more than a symbolic recalling, then one might practice Communion infrequently.

### *The Real Presence of Christ*

In our striving to find the middle way, United Methodists embrace that Jesus Christ is really present at Communion, in a way that he is not otherwise, but we do not try to explain exactly how we experience Christ's presence. We hold that "in remembrance" is far more than a symbolic recalling of Jesus' death; it is the dynamic re-presentation of the living Christ. This is from "This Holy Mystery" (see footnote):

#### Transubstantiation

There's a mouthful. Many protestants think Roman Catholics believe that at Communion, the bread and wine are magically changed into the body and blood of Christ. This seems like nonsense, since the bread and wine still look and taste like bread and wine. Perhaps this will help.

This Roman Catholic doctrine is grounded in Aristotle's understanding of reality, as worked out by Thomas Aquinas and others.

Aristotle held that every object consists of *accidents* and *substance*. The object's *accidents* are all of its properties, everything that can be perceived by our senses. Its *substance* is its essence. For example, the *accidents* of this piece of paper you are holding are its color, size, texture, shape, smell and so on – everything that makes it paper so far as you can tell. But for Aristotle, its essence, its underlying "paper-ness" is something different; it is its *substance*. In other words, the piece of paper's *substance* is separate from the paper's properties.

Aquinas and others applied Aristotle's view of reality to the bread and wine of communion. The doctrine of transubstantiation ("conversion in substance") holds that when the bread and wine are blessed, their *accidents* remain as they were. They still look and taste like bread and wine. But . . . the *substance* of the bread and wine is converted from "bread-ness" and "wine-ness" to "Christ-ness." They may taste like bread and wine but the underlying reality is that they have become the body and blood of Christ. Thus, Roman Catholics claim the actual physical presence of Christ at Communion.

"United Methodists, along with other Christian traditions, have tried to provide clear and faithful interpretations of Christ's presence in the Holy Meal. Our tradition asserts the real, personal, living presence of Jesus Christ. For United Methodists, the Lord's Supper is anchored in the life of the historical Jesus of Nazareth, but is not primarily a remembrance or memorial. We do not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe that the elements are essential tangible means through which God works. We understand the divine presence in temporal and relational terms. In the Holy Meal of the church, the past, present, and future of the living Christ come together by the power of the Holy Spirit so that we may receive and embody Jesus Christ as God's saving gift for the whole world." [Underlining added]

#### *Past, present, and future*

When we to come to the Lord's table, we are stepping out of our own time and into God's time. The past and the future come rushing to meet us. Think of it as living on heaven's clock. The Jews grasped this. Each year at Passover, the father would gather the family together over the Passover meal, saying "This is the night when our God, the Holy One, blessed be he, came down to Egypt and rescued us from the Egyptians . . ." Of course, it wasn't *the* night – at least not as we reckon time. But it was *the* night in God's time. The family was one with their ancestors during that meal. They were the same family being rescued in an eternal act of salvation.

In the same way, when we come forward to partake of Holy Communion, we are with Christ, with the disciples, and with all the people of God. God's future, his victory over sin and death, comes rushing to meet us over the Lord's table. It all takes a lot of imagination doesn't it . . . but, of course, so does Einstein.

<sup>1</sup>This is way too big a topic for this frustratingly short study. For more, you might read "This Holy Mystery: A UMC Understanding of Holy Communion," which was adopted by the General Conference in 2004. It is available at [www.gbod.org/worship/thisholymystery](http://www.gbod.org/worship/thisholymystery).

## *Thru the Bible* Daily Bible Readings

August 6 - 12

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Sunday</b> 2 Chronicles 12-15; Psalm 104:24-35 Rehoboam's checkered reign comes to an end; theme to look for ~ trusting the true God in times of crisis</p>	<p><b>Monday</b> A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p><b>Tuesday</b> 2 Chronicles 16-18; Psalm 105 Jehoshaphat chooses the Lord's presence</p>	<p><b>Wednesday</b> 2 Chronicles 19-21; Psalm 106:1-23 Jehoshaphat loses the Lord's presence; a threat to the dynasty</p>
<p><b>Thursday</b> 2 Chronicles 22-24; Psalm 106:24-28 The threat to the dynasty is diverted; Joash listens to the wrong advice</p>	<p><b>Friday</b> 2 Chronicles 25-27; Psalm 107 Two more lessons on how to lose the race (Joash's was the first); Royal models of right and wrong</p>
<p><b>Saturday</b> 2 Chronicles 28-30; Psalm 108 Hezekiah attains royal potential; temple cleansing and reorganization</p>	

## Sermon Notes

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### **Announcing the new St. Andrew Academy!!**

#### **Registration is now on-line at [www.standrewacademy.org](http://www.standrewacademy.org)**

We've completely revamped the Bible Academy. It is now the St. Andrew Academy. We've added lots of new classes and teachers: marriage, parenting, spiritual gifts, missions, and more have been added to our classes on the Bible and spiritual formation. An all-new brochure has been designed and is being mailed to thousands of homes in our area. This is outreach! You can see the class schedule now and even register on-line at our new website: [www.standrewacademy.org](http://www.standrewacademy.org). Please register early!

### **August Book Recommendation**

#### ***Take and Read – Spiritual Reading: an annotated list by Eugene H. Peterson***

I always like learning more about the reading lists of Christians and biblical scholars whose work I rely on. This book is a journey through the reading lists of Eugene Peterson. I'm sure that my spiritual journey would take a giant leap forward if I managed to read everything on this list. Of course, it has taken him a lifetime and he started much younger than I! I think you'll enjoy reading his comments on all these books. There are categories here for everyone, including some that seem hardly "spiritual," at least as we tend to use the word. Who'd ever think to find *A Canticle for Liebowitz* and murder mysteries!

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Certainly, the place to begin today is to share and to reflect upon your own perspectives on and experiences with Holy Communion. What were you taught about Holy Communion? Where did you learn this? How has your understanding of Communion changed over time? Perhaps you were once Roman Catholic or Southern Baptist. How does this affect your understanding of Communion at St. Andrew? Do you find Communion to be a rewarding experience or just another ritual we practice? Why do you think that Communion Sunday is often a poorly-attended service at some churches?

How might Communion be more meaningful for you at St. Andrew? Would you like to see us take Communion more often? Less often? Have you ever taken Communion in the chapel on Sunday mornings? (It is offered every Sunday and after each Saturday evening service). Why or why not?

You might grab a UMC hymnal and read through some of the written liturgy for Communion. You'll see that there are several versions. Do any of these help you to grasp some of what is in this study? Do you see the UMC's understanding of Communion reflected in the liturgy.

How would you try to summarize the UMC understanding of Holy Communion for someone else? Which pieces make the most sense to you? Are there parts you find troubling or perplexing?