

Sacred Words, Holy Bread

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 5, 2023 – 2nd Sunday in Lent

Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

I ran into an interesting problem just last evening as I was trying to find a YouTube video on Communion for today's *Sabbath Circles*® At Home Sunday School Lesson. I like to include a video with each lesson because I'm a realist and I know it's the most likely part of the lesson to actually be helpful in terms of giving interested parents and kids at least a little information on the topic of the week. But I could not find one I could use for today's Scripture text. Initially I hoped I could find one which explained Communion in one of the cutesy formats I have come to expect from a variety of YouTube options using everything from puppets to stop action cartoon figures. But, for today's topic – nothing. Don't get me wrong, there were plenty of kids videos on Communion but they were all either from the Roman Catholic perspective or the evangelical perspective, neither of which are accurate descriptions of our understanding of Communion. So, you see my problem. Do I use a cute cartoon video explaining Communion in a way that is not in line with our belief and practice? If I do, then I would need to explain why it's not quite right for our church and that seemed like too much to ask of parents or kids. My solution? I referred them to our own archive of Communion services on Facebook and invited them to pick one, watch it and then write down any questions to ask me.

Now I am sure you are wondering, does anyone ever ask me any questions based on the *Sabbath Circles*® lessons? Honestly, no. In all candor, I would be shocked if they did. I provide *Sabbath Circles*® each week so that I can honestly answer yes when folks ask if we have a Sunday School program. But truthfully, I am always shocked at how

many views those lessons get on Facebook. It usually averages about 40 by the middle of the week. So, I have to believe they are worth the time to write, worth the time to “put it out there” into the Facebook universe because we never know what seeds we are planting or how they will grow and flourish.

I wanted to talk about Communion today on this second Sunday in Lent because it is a Communion Sunday. I have occasionally preached on Communion before because I think it’s really important that we continue to learn about all the aspects of practicing this Christian faith we profess. The sacraments are central to that practice and, because they are so familiar to us, we tend to forget just how central they are to our faith. Take Communion, for example, and the fact that I could not find an appropriate kids’ video for this Sunday. What made these videos unacceptable to me? First of all – and this was surprising to me – the vast majority of the videos were not kid videos. They were adult male preachers pontificating about Communion and, presumably, why their particular church / denomination/tradition had it right. I don’t know this for sure but, given the titles of the various videos and the looks on the faces of the men (and they were all men) in the clips, they were pretty wound up – or pretty grumpy. It was hard to tell. And I cannot imagine why there were not more videos on this topic which featured women preachers but that is a matter for another time.

The second reason I had to pass on what few kid videos there were on the topic is because of the theology of Communion they were teaching in the videos. It’s funny that one of the few things all Christian churches have in common is Communion but it is also the place where our differences theologically are the most starkly clear. It’s the same thing with baptism though with baptism it’s not the theology that’s different so much as the how it happens and when in a

person's life it happens. With Communion, the similarities are in the bread and the juice with the main differences there having to do with what those elements actually are. For example, in our church we use gluten free crackers and grape juice. We used to serve them by passing the plates along the pews as a tangible reminder of our belief that we are to serve each other. Hopefully we will feel comfortable returning to that soon. In other churches, like the Catholics and the Episcopalians they use those plastic-looking wafers and wine. Again, the elements are different and yet the same.

So what is this different theology I'm talking about? Well, that's what comes up in what are called the words of institution in our tradition. What does that mean? The words of institution are when I tell the story of the Last Supper, on which our Communion celebrations are based, and explain the meaning and significance of each. In other words, I remind us every time we celebrate the sacrament why it matters and what it means. For us, Communion is a sacred remembrance of the last moments of Jesus with his disciples during his earthly mission. It is symbolic of all that Jesus did and taught during that time as well as a reminder that he was willing to die for this whole new way of being in relationship with God that he had been teaching to the people he encountered. Pretty basic, right? So why and how is that different from what other traditions believe? That all comes down to what is known as blood atonement theory.

We talked about blood atonement theory last week in the *Jesus and John Wayne* discussion group because it is probably the most critical difference between progressive and conservative Christian belief. Blood atonement theory is the belief in conservative churches, and the Roman Catholic church, that Jesus was intentionally allowed to die a bloody and painful death to atone or make peace with God for all the sins of humankind for all time. It is thus a physical, tangible

reminder of the broken body of Christ (the bread) and the blood of suffering and sacrifice (the wine or juice). This theology sees God as a vengeful, angry and judgmental God who demands sacrifice for sin. But, sinners can be freed from the worry of God's harsh judgement being directed at them if they just accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. That's pretty much it. Now the theory is that once you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior you will be forever changed and will henceforth and forevermore live your life as a good person because you have been redeemed. And you have been redeemed because you have been "washed in the blood of the lamb," the lamb being Jesus Christ on the cross. Communion in this theology is always seen as reminding you of this.

This blood atonement theology has been around since the earliest days of the Christian communities but it was not the original intent of the sacred fellowship meals we now know as Communion. That original intent is visible in the descriptions of the Last Supper in Matthew, Mark and Luke and can also be found in this text we read from Corinthians this morning. Paul's words here, interestingly enough, are the words which are part of the eucharistic or Communion prayers in most Christian liturgies for communion. But, think about that for a moment. Paul was most definitely not at the last supper with Jesus and the disciples when the scene he is describing happened. He was still persecuting Jesus and all his followers at that time. And yet, his words here are the essence of Communion as we understand it and believe. Paul's words are the sacred words we believe capture our connection with God made tangible through the sharing of holy bread and juice. How did Paul know these words? The biblical scholars I checked with explain that he was just carrying on the tradition he had learned as he became more and more integrated into the community of the other apostles

and the first house churches. In other words, he learned by doing. Reasonable enough. But, I confess, I have always wondered if perhaps his incredible insight into this holy moment was also part of that moment when he was confronted by the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus. Was it possible Jesus communicated everything essential he wanted Paul to know in that moment? Worth considering, I think.

However they came to be, these words of Paul's do capture the simple teaching and elegant symbolism of this final gift Jesus gave to the ones he would leave behind. Paul writes, "that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'this is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'" In remembrance of me. That's the essence of why we celebrate Communion as we do. Those very words appear on Communion Tables in our church and so many other Protestant churches. We are not remembering Christ's bloody suffering and death. We are not cowering in fear before a vengeful God, trusting that receiving the elements will somehow make Jesus' suffering our own, and vice versa, so that we will be found guiltless before God. We do not believe we must be "washed in the blood of the lamb" to be in right relationship with God.

Now let me stop right here to be clear that I am not saying this belief is wrong or without merit because that is not for me or anyone else to say. It is clearly deeply meaningful and transformative to many, many people, my own brother among them. What I am saying is that this particular understanding of Communion is not ours. We focus on the gift of grace from Jesus which is at the core of our Communion celebrations. We see this sacred meal as nourishment for the challenges we face every day, as healing balm for our worries and fears whatever they may be. We understand it as the most significant means of reaching across the gap between ourselves and God. Jesus is

the bridge from God to us and Communion is our recognition and celebration of that sacred truth.

Before closing, we should note one more significant part of the context of Paul's words for the sacred meal we know as Communion. We need to remember that this letter is Paul's response to a letter he received from the community leaders from the church in Corinth because they were upset about some things happening in their group and they were asking Paul for advice. The problem he was addressing here is that the sacredness of this meal among the followers of Jesus was being lost. Paul's very words here imply that Communion at that time was an entire meal with the bread and cup woven into it. In that way it was much more similar to that first sharing of bread and cup which Jesus did with the disciples. But now this holy meal had become something else entirely. People were coming early just to eat their fill before other folks could arrive. Others were enjoying the wine entirely too much. So the sacredness of this moment when holy words of blessing and remembrance were to be the central focus was being lost as the dinner devolved into a party where some had way too much and others ended up with nothing. Obviously, this was not what Jesus had in mind when he gave this gift to the disciples at the Last Supper. Paul knew this and he was quite upset with the folks who saw this sacred moment only as a chance to party and eat their fill. His words we read today are his reminder of the true significance of this sacred moment. He forcefully reminds the Corinthians, and us, that the bread and cup are so much more than mere food and drink. They are essential components of a new life lived in Christ as we remember and celebrate his life, his teachings and all he expects of us, those who would follow in his footsteps.

Dear ones, the sacred words and holy bread of our Communion celebrations here in our own beloved community are what God

provides to sustain us through all the challenges of life. These simple elements of crackers and juice, bread and new wine, are the sign and symbol of our taking Jesus into our very beings. Through these simple, everyday items of food and drink we are blessed and sustained for whatever it is God places before us. They are the stuff of new life every time we consume them. They are the promise of new beginnings always possible, often through the simplest things. Sacred words, holy bread, dear ones, are the building blocks of our faith. How will you let them into your hearts this day? Amen.