

## 1 Sermon, February 2, 2014

Texts: Revelation 19:6-10, Luke 22:24-30

Title: "Holy Communion as a Converting Sacrament"

1. Holy Communion can convert you
2. If you're really open to Christ, and want more faith
3. This can happen at any stage

### 1. Holy Communion can convert you

I'm starting this week to talk about some things that are particularly Methodist – things that are emphasized in our tradition of the German Evangelicals, the United Brethren in Christ and the Methodists. These are our roots.

Our spiritual ancestor, John Wesley, spoke of Holy Communion as a "converting ordinance."

This means that when we take Holy Communion, it is not because we're already perfect, but because we are seeking to approach God, we are desiring to be more Christ-like.

Holy Communion, he said, was a means of grace – a path toward deeper faith, and so God can use Holy Communion to convert us – to perfect God's love within us.

John Wesley assumed that the normal way a person would come to experience personal faith in Christ was by praying, meditating on the Scriptures, and receiving Holy Communion.

I quote here Bishop Timothy Whitaker of Florida, who wrote:

In his sermon on "The Means of Grace" Mr. Wesley describes how a person would come to experience personal faith in Christ. He is describing the journey to faith to someone we would call a "seeker," but Mr. Wesley called him "a stupid, senseless wretch."

Wesley says this person experiences "God [coming] upon him unaware" and pricking his conscience. Then he begins seeking how to find God. Mr. Wesley says if this man "finds a preacher who speaks to the heart, he is amazed, and begins searching the Scriptures." "The more he hears and reads, the more concerned he is; and the more he meditates [on the Scriptures] day and night." Maybe he finds some other spiritual literature that helps him.

Then the seeker begins to pray to God although he hardly knows what to say. He wants to pray with other believers in church on Sunday.

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In church he observes others going up to the Table of the Lord. At first he is hesitant to receive the Lord's Supper, but eventually he goes because he realizes that Christ commanded us to "do this." And Mr. Wesley concludes, "And thus he continues in God's way, in hearing, reading, meditating, praying, and partaking of the Lord's Supper, till God, in the manner that pleases Him, speaks to his heart, 'Thy faith hath saved thee. Go in peace.'"

This is John Wesley's simple outline of how someone with no faith in Christ might come to faith in Christ. Mr. Wesley could hardly conceive of someone coming to faith in Christ *without* participating in Holy Communion.

Holy Communion draws us toward Christ.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke shows us how, even when Jesus' disciples are selfish and argumentative, Jesus invites them to the table.

We read in Luke that the Disciples were gathered with Jesus for the Last Supper. Jesus had just shared the news that he was going to suffer; while Jesus didn't directly say he would die, he told them to remember him. Jesus gave them something to do in his memory – share bread and cup. Then he told them that someone was going to betray him.

And then Luke tells us that a dispute rose among them about who was the greatest. And Jesus interrupted them and told them that the greatest are the most humble, the most important are those who serve.

The disciples showed themselves to be human and sinful and lacking in understanding. They were crass and selfish at the moment that Jesus was sharing his very self with them.

But what then did Jesus do?

He told them that they would eat and drink at his table in his kingdom. He said, "you have stood by me in my trials, so I give you my kingdom."

In other words, even though the disciples had shown themselves to be human and sinful and lacking in understanding, Jesus would reward them because they kept sticking by him. As imperfect as their faith was, they didn't give up.

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Jesus welcomed them to the table of the Last Supper and the table of the heavenly kingdom, even though they were insensitive and argumentative.

The same message comes to us in the book of Revelation, where the angel admits that even he's imperfect, but the marriage supper of the lamb goes on.

The marriage supper of the lamb is another way of talking about Holy Communion; it's also another way of talking about the union of Christ with those who follow Christ. And we don't have to be perfect to join in the marriage supper of the Lamb.

#### 2. If you're really open to Christ, and want more faith

You don't have to be perfect, but you have to be trying to live your faith if Holy Communion is to do you any good.

You have to be humble and open and know that you're not there yet. You have to desire to love and serve God if Holy Communion is going to do you any good.

That's the message of Luke and Revelation and Wesley.

#### 3. This can happen at any stage

And John Wesley goes further. He says that you can be at any stage in your life of faith – and Holy Communion can still be a converting ordinance. Holy Communion can be a means of grace if you're just discovering that you need God, or if you've lived a Christian life for 50 years.

To those who believe their faith is not what it could be Wesley would say, "Come!"

Come! Because sharing in the sacrament will help your faith to grow! Come! Because it is part of your relationship with God to receive the means of grace that God has provided for you to strengthen you!

Come! Because even though you feel unworthy, the Holy Spirit may use this sacrament to work a new awakening, a reviving, a conversion in your heart from weak, fragile, dying faith to bold, robust, lively faith.

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My wife, Marianne, has a personal witness about Holy Communion as a converting ordinance.

It was during seminary. Marianne started seminary as a Unitarian-Universalist. That was the faith she grew up in. She was not a Christian, which is perhaps more normal than not in that tradition. She went to theological school because she wanted to teach ethics in college.

In her second Marianne went, as was her habit to one of the twice weekly chapel services led by the School of Theology students. One Tuesday morning she went to the chapel, got a bulletin, sat down in the third row from the front and opened the bulletin.

Oh no! It was a Communion service. As a Unitarian Universalist she believed communion wasn't for her (UU's don't celebrate the sacraments). She almost got up and left, but the service had already started. She stayed, and heard a Communion service for the first time.

The worship leaders were all students she knew. The Holy Spirit was working in that service so that when the invitation to receive Communion was given to everyone, she found herself coming forward.

She remembers so well how her liturgy professor Horace Allen handed her a piece of bread and said "accept Christ, sister." As she ate the bread and drank from the cup that day God's love was made real to her in a way it never had before. Up until then she believed in God but God was an impersonal force felt in nature or in quiet moments of meditation; God was not for her a personal being with whom she could have a relationship.

But there and then in that service she understood God loved the whole world and also loved her; that Christ died for the whole world and also for her. When she left that Communion service that day something had profoundly changed. She felt a peace and calm she had not known before.

That's not the end of the story. She was baptized and lived as a Christian within the Unitarian Universalist Church for a number of years. Later, she became United Methodist.

Holy Communion did not answer all her questions, in fact, it raised new ones. She did not immediately become a perfect person.

The journey has been full of joys and challenges, but Holy Communion was a defining moment for her.

I hope that, today, as you prepare to receive this gift of bread and cup, this undeserved free gift from Christ, that you will allow the experience to convert you just a little bit more. Amen.

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24 The apostles got into an argument about which one of them was the greatest. 25 So Jesus told them: Foreign kings order their people around, and powerful rulers call themselves everyone's friends.[a] 26 But don't be like them. The most important one of you should be like the least important, and your leader should be like a servant. 27 Who do people think is the greatest, a person who is served or one who serves? Isn't it the one who is served? But I have been with you as a servant. 28 You have stayed with me in all my troubles. 29 So I will give you the right to rule as kings, just as my Father has given me the right to rule as a king. 30 You will eat and drink with me in my kingdom, and you will each sit on a throne to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. (Luke 22:24-30, CEV)

24 A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 25 But he said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. 28 "You are those who have stood by me in my trials; 29 and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, 30 so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Luke 22:24-30, NRSV)

6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,  
"Hallelujah!  
For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.  
7 Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his bride has made herself ready;  
8 to her it has been granted to be clothed  
with fine linen, bright and pure"—  
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.  
9 And the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me,

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"These are true words of God." 10 Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." (Revelation 19:6-10, NRSV)

6 Then I heard what seemed to be a large crowd that sounded like a roaring flood and loud thunder all mixed together. They were saying,

"Praise the Lord!

Our Lord God All-Powerful  
now rules as king.

7 So we will be glad and happy  
and give him praise.

The wedding day of the Lamb  
is here,

and his bride is ready.

8 She will be given  
a wedding dress

made of pure

and shining linen.

This linen stands for  
the good things

God's people have done."

9 Then the angel told me, "Put this in writing. God will bless everyone who is invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb." The angel also said, "These things that God has said are true."

10 I knelt at the feet of the angel and began to worship him. But the angel said, "Don't do that! I am a servant, just like you and everyone else who tells about Jesus. Don't worship anyone but God. Everyone who tells about Jesus does it by the power of the Spirit." (Revelation 19:6-10, CEV)