

SERMON TITLE: "Our Covenant with God: Giving Thanks"

SERMON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 10:27-11:1 and 11:23-26

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: November 1, 2020, at First UMC (Communion and Pledge Card Consecration Day)

## **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout the month of October, we spent our worship time thinking about the theme of "Our Covenant with God." We ran through the Old Testament, covering God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Joshua, and the prophet Jeremiah. Along the way, we dropped hints about the covenants God had with Moses and David; and, each Sunday, in our calls to worship, we read about covenant themes from the Book of Psalms. If you were paying really close attention, you might have noticed that, in my Pastor's Pen column in the November newsletter, I even mentioned the idea of covenant in regard to John the Baptist's father, Zechariah. And last Sunday, from the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews, we read about God's new covenant established in Jesus. After all of that, you might think that we would have run completely out of covenant material. But, no, we haven't.

That's why we could read this morning about the cup of the new covenant in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. In our reading from chapters 10 and 11, the Apostle Paul was instructing that rather-new congregation about how they should behave inside and outside of worship. All for the glory of God, they needed to imitate Paul, just as he imitated Christ. In other words, their covenant with God should include giving thanks.

## **1—THAT'S WHAT JESUS DID**

That is, after all, what Jesus did. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul relates what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper. On that very night when Jesus was betrayed, he took a loaf of bread, and gave thanks. Jesus' act of giving thanks for the bread is also described in the Gospel of Luke's story of the Last Supper. In the versions of that important meal found in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, where Jesus is said to have "blessed" the bread, we are also told that Jesus gave thanks for the cup.

Even though Jesus' next words were about brokenness and blood, it's clear that this "cup of the new covenant," as Jesus called it, was closely tied to the act of giving thanks to God. No matter how bad things were going to get on this night of betrayal—no matter how much denial, disappointment, injustice, violence, suffering, and death were going to happen—Jesus' key covenantal action was in connecting himself and his disciples to God by giving thanks.

When Jesus' body was dead and gone, Jesus wanted his disciples to remember more than the trauma and guilt of that night. As often as they would eat and drink that sacred meal, Jesus wanted them to remember that God's covenant was bigger than their physical weaknesses and spiritual failures. God's covenant with the people began long before Jesus' life, and it would be stronger than the horror of Jesus' death. In this new covenant of Jesus' blood, their relationship with God would have an opportunity to live on into the future, as it had already done for thousands of years in the past. God's covenant was not about to end on the cross. And that was a great reason for giving thanks.

I wonder how often we see situations of adversity as opportunities to give thanks? In the midst of hard times, do we stop and give thanks for what is good? When tragedy and trauma strike us, do we think to offer words of gratitude to God for the blessings we still have? Do we only cry out in disbelief, pain, and anger? Or do we thank God for the blessings that we can't see yet, but surely will come, if we trust God for the future?

I know this coronavirus pandemic has us very stressed. As the new daily case numbers rise and hospital beds fill, it's hard to see any light at the end of the tunnel. Sickness and death, workarounds at work, too much or too little time with family, difficulties with education, economic hardships, loneliness and boredom, few social outlets, reduced public and community services, limited entertainment, and generalized worry are making life pretty hard. As if all that weren't bad enough, we've also been concerned about hurricanes, fires, racial injustice, social unrest, the elections, and lots of other problems.

All the more reason to take our cue from Jesus. Facing his own imminent suffering and death, what did Jesus do? Wallow in pity or throw up his hands in despair? Abandon his faith in the time of crisis? No. Jesus took the time to remind himself and his disciples about the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. Just like the Jews had done year after year for centuries and centuries—through famines and pestilence and war—Jesus and his disciples celebrated the Passover meal. While re-telling that story of God’s never-failing salvation, Jesus reframed the imminent breaking of his body and spilling of his blood as the bread and cup of the new covenant. Obviously, some extremely difficult changes were about to happen. But, as long as Jesus and the disciples kept their faith and hope in God, the God of everlasting covenant would see them through. And that was a wonderful reason for giving thanks.

## **2—THE COVENANT PRACTICE OF GIVING THANKS IN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS**

Of course, we know that our covenant with God isn’t only about giving thanks in the extreme situations of life and death. There are plenty of other, more everyday times, when our covenant with God can also be about giving thanks.

The Apostle Paul explains this in 1 Corinthians 10. In that chapter, he’s having a rather drawn-out conversation about how a congregation of believers should relate to one another. In verses 16 and 17, he makes the point that, when we partake of the cup of blessing and the broken bread, we are sharing in the blood and body of Christ. And then he writes, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”

That sounds nice, like a sweet message of Christian love and harmony, right? Giving thanks in that situation would be easy, wouldn’t it? But, the truth is, things weren’t going quite that smoothly in the Corinthian church. In verses 27-33, which Bob read for us, we can see that there was a disagreement roiling in the congregation. These were the very early years of Christianity, everyone in the Corinthian congregation was a new Christian, and they had a lot to figure out. Some of them

thought that their salvation in Christ granted them the right to exercise religious liberty. Others in the congregation felt more constrained by their consciences.

The specific issue in their day was whether or not it was acceptable for Christians to eat meat that had been sold in the city markets after it had been sacrificed to idols. Today, we might equate that to controversial questions like, “Is it acceptable for a Christian to get an abortion?” or “Can a Christian own and use guns?” or “Can an LGBTQ person be a Christian?” or “Is it acceptable for a Christian to gamble, drink alcohol, or smoke?” Or maybe today’s issues would be about requiring facemasks and social distance, or when we should be able to return to in-person worship. On some of these questions, one Christian might lean toward liberty, while another Christian might lean toward restraint.

If just hearing that list of topics caused your blood pressure to rise, you know how such questions can be fraught with conflicting opinions, beliefs, and practices. Sometimes it’s hard for people on opposing sides to remember that, we who share in one bread are one body in Christ. Sometimes it feels more like we are broken crumbs and spilled juice than the redemptive, spiritual, and powerful body of Christ.

That’s why, in 1 Corinthians 10:31, the Apostle Paul wrote, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.” Whatever they did, Paul wanted them to do it with thanksgiving for the freedom they had in Christ, with thanksgiving for appropriate sensitivity of conscience, and also with thanksgiving for their brothers and sisters in Christ who might have different perspectives. They really didn’t all have to vote exactly the same way in order to love each other and be grateful for their Christian fellowship.

The cup of the new covenant truly was a cup of blessing. In our covenant with God, the one body of Christ has the spiritual power to draw together a diverse people into one body redeemed by Christ for the salvation of the world. This message from today’s scripture sounds a lot to me like our church’s vision statement. Say it with me if you can: “First United Methodist Church will meet spiritual

needs, by developing relationships with Christ, community, and the world.” For the Corinthians and for us, that everyday aspiration and possibility is a fantastic reason for giving thanks.

### **CONCLUSION**

In a few minutes, the camera and I will be moving over by the altar for the sacrament of Holy Communion. I hope you have some bread and grape juice or suitable alternatives ready. I’m not sure if you realize this, but the communion liturgy that we say is called “The Great Thanksgiving.” In some denominations, they use the Greek word “eucharist,” which means the “good gift” or, essentially, “thanks for the good gift.” The cup of the new covenant truly was and is an act of giving thanks.

In his Last Supper with the disciples, just before he went to his torturous death on the cross, Jesus tied it all together for us. No matter how stressful and difficult our situation; no matter if we agree with one another about everything or not: The cup of the new covenant is what connects us with God and God’s people. The cup of the new covenant is what holds us in communion throughout the ages and across the difficulties of our day. The covenant that God offers us is strong. Our covenant with God is worthy of giving thanks.