

SERMON TITLE: "Practicing Communion"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 22:14-20
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 3, 2021, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

In his 2008 book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell wrote that the difference between those who were good at something and those who were phenomenally good at the same task was the amount of time they had spent working on it. For example, if you wanted to be a fantastic violinist, computer programmer, or race car driver, the key was to practice, practice, practice. Gladwell's rule was that to become really skilled at any highly complex task, a person should expect to put in 10,000 hours of study and practice.

Obviously, not everything we do is highly complex, and some skills can be mastered rather quickly. But, still, there's something to be said for practice. In the history of Christianity and other religions of the world, religious practices are an important part of faith. While some folks think that it's good enough to hold some basic beliefs, the religious masters always put in lots of time practicing prayer and praise, practicing spiritual connection, practicing service to God and neighbor, practicing their study of sacred scriptures, and practicing spiritual growth.

In the United Methodist Church, we come out of the tradition of John and Charles Wesley. Those brothers who lived in England in the 1700s were both students at Oxford University. While other students were behaving in the frivolous way that many college students do, the Wesley brothers and some of their friends met together for Bible study and prayer. They went out into the community to visit prisoners and the sick. And they raised funds to help widows and orphans. Because John and Charles and their friends were so super-conscientious with their spiritual practices, other students made fun of them and called them "Methodists." For 300 years since, our spiritual heritage has been a methodical and disciplined practice of our faith.

So, on this World Communion Sunday, I thought it might be appropriate to focus our attention on the spiritual discipline of holy communion. Why would we devote ourselves to this ritual? What's the benefit of practicing communion?

1—CONNECTS US TO ANCIENT FAITH TRADITION

Benefit number one of practicing communion is that it connects us to ancient faith tradition. The story we read from Luke 22 tells of Jesus and the disciples eating the Last Supper. Of course, it wasn't just the last meal of Jesus. It was the Jewish Passover meal. Ever since God had used Moses to rescue the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, the Passover meal had been a sacred annual tradition. It was the yearly time of remembrance of God's mighty acts of deliverance.

Bible scholars think that the Exodus might have happened about 1500 years before Jesus. So, when Jesus and his disciples were eating the Last Supper, they were connecting to what was already an ancient faith tradition. Today, we add 2000 more years to that. For 3500 years, God's people have been using a holy meal as a means of remembering God's power of salvation. When we practice communion, it's a sensory and faith-filled experience of the moment, that in many ways feels like a private and intimate connection between us and God. But, when we practice communion, we are never alone. Practicing communion connects us all the way back to the community of faith of the Old Testament forefathers and foremothers who trusted in God for their freedom from oppression and for a hopeful future. There's a lot we can learn from them as we share in their holy meal. Practicing communion grounds us and connects us to a strong and ancient faith tradition.

2—CONNECTS US WITH GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

A second benefit to us is that practicing communion connects us with God, specifically through Jesus Christ. In Luke 22, we see how Jesus added to the Jewish remembrance of Passover by making reference to his own body and his own blood. It wasn't just a Passover lamb that was being slain. This

time, the deliverance and liberation would involve a different Lamb—Jesus, the son of God, who would soon be hung on a cross to die to take away the sins of the world.

Christians believe that we are connected to God’s mercy and love through Jesus’ sacrifice. Just as the wine of the Jewish Passover meal symbolized the lamb’s blood that was smeared over the doorposts to save the Hebrews at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, so Jesus referred to the fruit of the vine as his cup and blood of the new covenant, which would again confer God’s merciful and saving love.

In Luke 22:19, Jesus tells his disciples to “Do this in remembrance of me.” Jesus intended the disciples to remember him as they ate this important meal. Later, they would, of course, remember Jesus’ death on the cross. But I suspect that, during this meal before Jesus was killed, he also wanted his disciples to remember all the things he had already taught them. Jesus wanted them to remember how he connected them to God while teaching beatitudes on the hillside, while telling parables along the road, and while calming storms at sea. It wasn’t only the trauma of the crucifixion that Jesus wanted his disciples to remember. Jesus also wanted them to remember him healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and challenging the powerful who bullied the weak. Through all his teachings and actions, Jesus showed his followers who God was. As the disciples would partake of Jesus’ broken body and spilled blood, they would recall Jesus’ perfect example of what it could mean to love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love their neighbor as themselves.

The same is true for us today. When we regularly practice communion, we remember Jesus. We connect with God through Jesus Christ.

3—CONNECTS US WITH A COMMUNITY OF FAITH

A third benefit of practicing communion is that it connects us with a local community of faith. Whether we’re worshipping in the sanctuary or through Facebook Live, the discipline of frequent communion brings us together for Sunday worship and assures us that we not only have a connection to an ancient faith tradition and a direct connection to God through Jesus Christ, but we also have a

present-day connection to other Christian believers. Do you hear how the words *communion* and *community* come from the same root? A community of faith is much more than a bunch of people who live in the same neighborhood or shop in the same market area. A Christian community of faith is the body of Christ. As we gather to eat the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion, we actually become the flesh, bones, hands, and feet of Christ, so we can continue his good work in the world.

I know some folks think they can fly solo on their spiritual journey. But I'm telling you today that the community of faith formed by Holy Communion is no small thing. The bond that's created when we drink from the same cup and eat from the same loaf is profound and strong. That bond that holds us together in Christian community provides prayers for us when we're sick and troubled, it offers guidance when we're tempted and wandering, it encourages us when we're having doubts about ourselves and God, it stimulates us to do good in the world, and it even sometimes provides practical material assistance when we're going through times of grief or poverty.

I've seen evidence of this Christian community just in the past week. Last Sunday, Steve and I were with my mom in Libby, Montana. We attended her church, where she has been an active participant for 47 years. Because that was Mom's last Sunday with them before she moved here to Ogden, her dear church family gave her a wonderful send-off. During worship, they gathered around her in the sanctuary and prayed for her. Afterward, they put on a great potluck lunch. And they gave Mom all kinds of nice cards and messages of affection—including a "Distinguished Service Award" for all the good that Mom had done in and through that congregation. They knew that leaving her hometown and church family was going to be a challenge, and so they rallied to help her with a kind and thoughtful celebration. And since we got back here to Ogden, many of you have been great with your help—with casseroles, snacks, prayers; offers of physical labor; and encouraging and welcoming messages. We don't practice communion just so people will love us and help us, but I have to say that that is a pretty-wonderful benefit. Practicing communion connects us with a local community of faith.

4—CONNECTS US WITH THE WIDER CHURCH AND WORLD

And, of course, the community of faith isn't just local. Our annual World Communion Sunday reminds us that practicing communion also connects us with the wider church all around the world. The ritual of Holy Communion allows us to be part of something so much bigger than ourselves. Since Jesus and the disciples ate that Last Supper, Christian faith has spread around the globe, encompassing people of every nation and language. Regular and disciplined participation in Holy Communion places us in the midst of that vast community, which stretches our thinking, our compassion, and our desires for peace.

Practicing communion actually sends us out in mission to that wider world. The Catholic word *mass* comes from the Latin word for *dismissal*. Enriched by prayer, scripture, song, and the sacramental elements, the dismissal sends out the worshipers to act on their faith as they go about their daily lives. Even our own United Methodist communion prayer asks "that we may be for the world the body of Christ . . . in ministry to all the world." Communion isn't just some ritualistic thing we do inside our church building or at home while worshipping through Facebook. Regular practice of communion prepares and sends us out to do God's good and positive work in the world around us. Practicing communion connects us to the wider church and world.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this sermon, I told you about John and Charles Wesley and their dedication to spiritual practices. They took communion every Sunday and on many other special holy days. In our United Methodist Church today, we don't serve or receive communion that often. But each time we do is a sacred opportunity to connect with our ancient faith tradition, to connect with God through Jesus Christ, to connect with our local congregation, and to connect with the wider church and world. I hope you will join me regularly in these benefits of practicing communion!