

SERMON TITLE: "Christian Devotion to Breaking Bread"

SERMON TEXT: Acts 2:37-47

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: September 11, 2022, at First UMC (We served communion.)

INTRODUCTION

Thanks again to David Barron for leading worship last Sunday while I was away on vacation.

With our Ogden FUMC services archived on Facebook, I was able to worship with you all later in the week and be blessed by David's good message about "Being a Christian 24/7."

You may recall that, during the month of August, I preached a series of sermons from the New Testament letter to the Ephesians on the subject of grace. God's glorious grace permeated those chapters and verses and gave us a refresher course on the most basic aspects of our salvation through Jesus Christ. Now, we're going to take our Christian experience a little farther. After we repent of our sins and receive God's merciful forgiveness, then what? What does God expect from us? How are we supposed to practice this newly improved life of Christian faith?

To get at these next steps, we're going to spend four Sundays focusing our attention on what the earliest Christians did. On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the people gathered in Jerusalem, thousands repented of their sins, received forgiveness, and were baptized. Then those new believers put themselves to some disciplines to help them grow in their Christian faith. As stated in Acts 2:42, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers." Since we'll serve communion later in this service and we'll have a potluck lunch after worship, we're going to begin this series today with the Christian devotion to breaking bread.

1—CONNECTS US WITH GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

These verses from Acts 2 don't spell out a developed theology of the Christian sacrament of Holy Communion. But it does seem evident that even the earliest Christians figured out quite quickly that there were some sacred and helpful benefits to breaking bread together. Their initial practice and

devotion developed into a sacrament of the church for several reasons, the first of which is that breaking bread connects us with God through Jesus Christ.

Roman Catholics teach that the bread and wine of Holy Communion actually become the body and blood of Christ. In Protestant faith, we think of the communion elements more symbolically. But we still sense the mystical, miraculous presence of Christ in the bread and juice as a prime opportunity to connect with God.

The spiritual discipline of regularly receiving communion improves our lives by connecting us with God's mercy and love, which we believe was expressed in Jesus' Last Supper and subsequent death on the cross. 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. Similarly, Jesus referred to the fruit of the vine as his cup and blood of the new covenant, which would once again confer God's merciful and saving love.

Our devotion to breaking bread also connects us with God through the teachings and example of Jesus. When Jesus had his Last Supper with his disciples, he told them to repeat that sacred meal after he was gone. "Do this," Jesus said to them, "in remembrance of me." Of course, those memories would include Jesus' death on the cross. But the disciples' memories would also be full of Jesus teaching beatitudes on hillsides, telling parables along the road, and calming storms at sea. As the disciples would eat the bread and cup of the new covenant, they would recall Jesus healing the sick, speaking kindly to women and children, and challenging the powerful who bullied the weak. As the disciples devoted themselves to breaking bread, they would recall Jesus' perfect example of what it could mean to love the Lord their God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself. The same is true for us today. When we devote ourselves to breaking the bread of Christian faith, we are connected to God's mercy by remembering the loving sacrifice, example, and teachings of Christ.

2—CONNECTS US WITH A LOCAL COMMUNITY OF FAITH

A second benefit of our Christian devotion to breaking bread is that it connects us with a local community of faith. The discipline of frequent communion brings us together for Sunday worship, and assures that we have not only a vertical relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but also a horizontal connection with 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 or live by the same governing laws. A Christian community of faith is the body of Christ. As we gather together to eat the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion, we become the body of Christ together. With Christ at our head, some of us become eyes, some ears, some voices, some hands, some feet, and no doubt some of us become the stomachs and kidneys and all the other vital organs of the body of Christ.

I know some folks think they don't need a community of faith. They think they can fly solo on their spiritual journey. But I'm telling you that the community of faith that's formed by our devotion to 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. Even if you're worshipping with us from home via Facebook and using your own bread and juice, you're communing with *us* who are gathered here in this sanctuary. In spirit, you're gathering around the same communion table and breaking the same bread. This devotion 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 Jesus' good work in the world. And it even sometimes provides practical material assistance when we're going through times of grief or poverty.

I'm very glad that my mom lives here in Ogden now and that I'm able to help her in many ways. But when Mom still lived in Montana, just after my dad died, I was so amazed and grateful for the

assistance that was provided to her by the people of her church. That first winter after Dad died, the men of my mother's church shoveled, snow-blowed, and plowed out her sidewalks and long driveway so that she never had to miss any Sunday worship service, Bible study, or prayer group meeting. The Montana snow fell often that winter, but someone from that faith community was always Johnny-on-the-spot to help her out.

Such labor-intensive attention to a widow in need may not always happen in a community of faith, but most of us can attest to the considerable strength, hope, and help we receive from our congregational family—especially when we let people know the help we need. We benefit from our Christian devotion to breaking bread because it connects us with a local community of faith.

3—CONNECTS US WITH THE WIDER CHURCH AND WORLD

As our devotion to breaking bread connects us with God through Jesus and with the local community of faith, our Christian devotion to breaking bread also connects us with the wider church and the world. When we regularly participate in the sacrament of Holy Communion, we connect with the tradition of the Christian Church for 2000 years and the Jewish Passover tradition that goes back more than 3000 years. The Christian ritual of breaking bread together allows us to be part of something so much bigger than ourselves.

Today, it's common for people to claim to be "spiritual, but not religious." I think there's danger in cutting ourselves loose, like we can be authorities determining what is right and wrong all by ourselves. Yes, the institutional church has a lot of baggage. And, yes, traditional religious practices are in constant need of updating and reform. I agree with that. But I think our lives are a lot more grounded and meaningful when we connect with a strong faith tradition that not only goes backwards into the past but has spread all around the world, including people of every nation and race. Regular and devoted participation in Holy Communion places us in the midst of that rich and strong faith tradition.

Another way Christian devotion to breaking bread connects us to the wider world is that the sacrament actually sends us out to be involved in mission. The Catholic word *mass* comes from the Latin word for *dismissal*. As the mass nourishes and fortifies the worshipers through prayer, scripture, song, and the sacramental elements, the dismissal then sends the worshipers out 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 little ritual we do inside a church building. Regular devotion to breaking bread sends us out with a mission and a purpose to connect with and serve the world.

CONCLUSION

While on vacation last Sunday, my husband Steve and I worshiped at the United Methodist Church in Roseburg, Oregon. They served communion during that worship service, so I feel fortunate to be participating in the sacrament twice in eight days. And like us, those Roseburg United Methodists were going to have a potluck lunch today. Like Methodists and Christians all over the world and in times past, present, and future—we practice the Christian devotion of breaking bread. We do it because it connects us to God through Jesus Christ. We do it because it connects us to a local community of faith. And we do it because it connects us with the wider church and the world. That’s why we, like the earliest Christians, devote ourselves to breaking bread.