

SERMON SERIES: "Improving Our Lives through Spiritual Disciplines"
SERMON TITLE: "Receiving Holy Communion"
SERMON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 1, 2023, at First UMC (from home by Zoom due to COVID)

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of a new year, it's common for people to make resolutions to change our habits and improve our lives. After the three-month feasting season that includes Halloween candy, Thanksgiving stuffing, Christmas cookies, and New Year's Eve chip dip—many of us are ready to start eating a more healthy diet. After filling out our waistbands to the point of discomfort, we're motivated to shed a few pounds of blubber. With the help of a gym and personal devices that measure our physical activity, we're newly determined to be more disciplined about exercising our muscles.

Discipline isn't only for our bodies, however. Discipline is also for our souls. Just as our physical life can be improved by good habits, so can our spiritual life. Many of you know the reason why our church is named *United Methodist*. The *United* part came from the 1968 union of two denominations: The Methodist Church and the Evangelical *United Brethren*. The "Methodist" part of our name goes back to the early 1700s, when John and Charles Wesley were students at Oxford University in London. John, Charles, and some of their friends had strong religious interests. While other students were behaving in the ways that many college students do, the Wesley brothers and their friends met together to study the scriptures in their original Hebrew and Greek languages. They prayed together and discussed theology. They went out into the community to visit prisoners and the sick, and they raised funds to help widows and orphans. Because of their spiritual focus, this group called themselves "The Holy Club." But because of their super-conscientious spiritual disciplines, other students made fun of them and called them derisive names like "Bible Moths" and "Method-ists." Of course, that last nickname is the one that stuck. For three hundred years since, our spiritual heritage has been a methodical and disciplined practice of our faith.

In keeping with our Methodist heritage, I decided to preach a sermon series on how spiritual disciplines can improve our lives. Beginning today and continuing through January, I'm going to talk with you about baptism, scripture reading, prayer, fasting, and acts of mercy and justice. On this first Sunday of the New Year, we begin with the discipline of regular participation in Holy Communion. Obviously, this would be better if we were sharing this sacrament together in the sanctuary. But, with your substitute bread and juice at home, I think we can make this work.

1—CONNECTS US WITH GOD THROUGH JESUS CHRIST

The first way that regular participation in Holy Communion improves our lives is that the sacrament connects us with God through Jesus Christ. Roman Catholics believe that the bread and wine 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 an 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' 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 again confer God's merciful and saving love.

The spiritual discipline of regularly receiving communion 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 be more than his death on the cross. The memories of the disciples would 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 would partake of his 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 hearts, minds, souls, and strength and to love their neighbor as themselves. The same is true for us today. When we regularly participate in Holy Communion, our lives are improved as we connect to God's mercy by remembering the example and obeying the teachings of Jesus Christ.

2—CONNECTS US WITH A LOCAL COMMUNITY OF FAITH

A second way that regular participation in Holy Communion improves our lives 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 connection to 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—in person, by Facebook, or this morning by Zoom—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 the community of faith that is formed by means of Holy Communion is no small thing. The bond that is 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.

So many times I hear words of appreciation spoken in our congregation for the cards, prayers, calls, and kind gestures done to encourage and support one another. The ways we care and tend to one another's needs are so helpful. They are good medicine for the body and the soul. I think most of us can attest to the considerable strength, hope, and help we have received from our congregational family—especially when we have let people know the help we needed. We improve our lives by frequent participation in Holy Communion because it connects us with a local community of faith.

3—CONNECTS US WITH THE WIDER CHURCH AND WORLD

A third way that the discipline of Holy Communion improves our lives is that it connects us with the wider church and 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 ritual of Holy Communion allows us to be part of something so much bigger than ourselves and even bigger than our congregation. 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 disciplined participation in Holy Communion places us in the midst of that rich and strong faith tradition.

Another way the discipline of Holy Communion 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*. 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 a church building or through electronic worship. Regular participation in this spiritual discipline improves our lives by sending us out with a mission and a purpose to improve the world, as well.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this sermon, I told you about John Wesley and the Holy Club. Their disciplined approach to their spiritual life included their participation in Holy Communion every Sunday plus additional holy day services at the Church of England. In our United Methodist Church today we don't serve communion that often, but I certainly agree with Wesley that we should receive the sacrament as often as we can. When we participate regularly in Holy Communion, we improve our lives by connecting with God through Jesus Christ, by connecting with the local faith community, and by connecting with the wider church and world. May you and I devote ourselves, therefore, to this spiritual discipline of Holy Communion.