

Communion as Remembering, Forgiving, Belonging (Sacraments 2)

1 Corinthians 11:23-34 & Exodus 13:3, 5-10

November 13, 2022

First Presbyterian Church, Luling

Last week we talked about sacraments in general, and communion in terms of thanksgiving and celebration. Maybe we weren't feeling extra thankful or celebratory, but then again, those are good reasons to come to the table: to have our thankfulness and joy replenished.

This week, we have three other themes of the Lord's Supper to consider: remembering, forgiving, and belonging. Remembering isn't too distant from thanksgiving, because from its very beginning, the Lord's Table tied remembering God's actions on the people's behalf to thanking God for those actions. Remembrance and thanksgiving go together.

There are three kinds of remembrance that we do together around the table. The first, which we touched on last week, is remembering how we got here, remembering God's acts from creation up until now. We remember the Passover, delivery from slavery in Egypt, which is why we read that today from the Old Testament. That Passover celebration meal is the meal that Jesus and the disciples were sharing in the upper room.

We also remember that meal, the meal that Jesus and the disciples shared together, that became the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The passage that we read from First Corinthians is the earliest account of that meal, and it's told as a memory: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you." It's a sacred memory, passed carefully from Jesus himself, to Paul, to the Christians in Corinth.

And as we remember God's acts of grace, and as we remember that last supper, we remember because Jesus commanded us to. "This is my body that is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me," he says. "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this in remembrance of me. Remembering is such a part of the sacrament that we can't do anything *but* remember.

Those rememberings are all communal, *we* remember. There's also an invitation, I think, to remember as we approach the Table, what Jesus has done for us, places when God's presence felt especially clear or close, times when the Spirit gave us just the words we needed, moments when God filled and surrounded us with exactly what we needed.

All of that remembering happens at the Table. It can happen other times, too, of course, but gathering at the Table invites us to remember.

Gathering at the Table also invites us to forgiveness. That was intentionally ambiguous. We are invited to seek forgiveness, as well invited to grant forgiveness ourselves. The second part of that First Corinthians reading discusses this. Examine yourselves, so that you don't eat unworthily. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructs the disciples to seek reconciliation: "When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." (Matt 5:23-24).

If we were Presbyterians living 150-200 years ago, our elders would have investigated and met with each member before a communion Sunday, so that the church could be sure that no one was receiving the sacrament unworthily. We've since decided that can be left up to each person and God, thankfully. Many people, though, approach the table with repentance and receive the sacrament as a gift of God's forgiveness. And it is.

My Lutheran pastor friend sent me this quote, from her bishop: "We finally meet one another not in our agreements or our disagreements, but at the foot of the cross, where God is faithful, where Christ is present with us, and where, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are one in Christ."

That bridges the theme of forgiveness to the theme of belonging. We reconcile with each other, because everyone is invited to the Table, and we are no more worthy or unworthy than anyone else. Everyone belongs.

Forgive me if I've told you this story before. As a seminary intern, one of my tasks was putting together a class to teach young elementary school students about communion. Their parents wanted help explaining communion to them before they started participating in the sacrament. I dutifully put together the class. My supervisor wanted me to present it to the Session. Very well. I did so. One elder questioned me as to why children would be welcomed to the Table. They can't possibly understand what it's all about. Righteously offended by this question, I didn't measure or filter my response, as might have been wise. "I don't think any of us *understand* communion," I threw back. I guess it was effective. I still believe it. *Understanding* is not the ticket for admittance to the Table. Nor any other human attribute. Jesus invites us to come, without condition.

Another friend gave me this, which is an invitation to the Table from a Presbyterian church of a different flavor than our Presbyterian, but I really love this part of it: "Jesus came not for the strong but for the weak; not for the righteous, but for sinners; not for the self-sufficient, but for those who know they need rescue. To all who are weary and need rest; to all who mourn and long for

comfort; to all who feel worthless and wonder if God even cares; to all who are weak and frail and desire strength; to all who sin and need a Savior—Jesus welcomes into his circle, adopts into his family, and reserves a place at his Table. For he is the mighty friend of sinners, the ally of his enemies, the defender of the indefensible, and the justifier of those who have no excuses left “(Scott Sauls).

Powerful, huh? We belong at the table because Jesus invites us. It’s an invitation of grace, not based on worthiness or age or gender or intellect or pedigree or anything human.

One more piece about belonging. Often in that prayer before communion, we pray for the Spirit to unite us with believers in every time and place as we partake in the meal. Having unity with believers in every place we can grasp. Sure, Christians across our community and country and world, are all receiving the sacrament as they gather on Sunday mornings. But I think we skip over the idea of being united with believers in every time, because that just isn’t the way we normally think. I’ve found it a great comfort, though, to think that as we gather around the Table, we are surrounded and joined by those who have come before us—those we knew and loved, and those we didn’t know. And we are even surrounded and joined by those who will come after us, before they ever come to be. We belong at the Table, not just with those we can see and hear, but with all those that Jesus loves. Thanks be to God.