

This morning, we come to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. Communion is a time of remembrance; when we remember and thank the Lord Jesus Christ for all He has done and is doing for us. The details and instructions for the Lord's Supper are recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and 1 Corinthians. This morning, let's look at Matthew's account from the twentieth-six chapter, verses 17-30.

Read Matthew 26:17-30

I have been asked on more than one occasion as to who can participate in communion at our church. What do you have to do in order to be included among those who receive the elements of the sacrament – the bread and juice? It's a good question, and one that unfortunately separates churches rather than uniting them as Jesus originally intended. Some churches require that you have to have been baptized before you can receive communion; others that you are an active member of that particular church; and then there are those churches who will examine your moral character before you can come forward. Traditionally, over the years the Methodist Church has come to value the "open table," welcoming all who want to know or to have a closer relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, this morning, let's address this question: "Who is worthy to come to the Lord's Table?" First, let's examine the guest list, those who actually participated in the first Lord's Supper. Verse 20 of this morning's text from Matthew states: "That evening Jesus took His place at the table with the twelve disciples." The Gospel of Mark confirms this. And Luke tells us that when the hour came Jesus and the apostles reclined at the table.

Based on this, we can safely assume that the twelve disciples were present with Jesus that night. Now this was a motley group if there ever was one. Four were fishermen; one was a tax collector; and one was a member of a radical group bent on overthrowing the Roman government by force. Think about it, there's old Peter, the headstrong fisherman who is always speaking before he thinks, always putting his foot in his mouth. Then there's James and John, the Sons of Thunder, whose mother Salome had asked Jesus to give her sons the highest seats of power and honor when He established His kingdom here on earth. There's Thomas the doubter.

And let's not forget about Judas; he's at the table too. Did you remember who was sitting next to Jesus during our drama of the Living Last Supper on Ash Wednesday? It was the one who would betray Jesus before the night was over. Judas was sitting at Jesus' left; so close that he and Jesus appear to have a private conversation in this morning's text. In verse 25 Judas asked Jesus: "Surely, it is not I who will betray you," and Jesus responded: "It is you."

In a way, I'm kind of glad that Judas was at the table, because it signifies that we are all welcome no matter how bad we are or what we have done or might do. Jesus invites all to His table; He is willing to break bread with anyone who is willing to come to Him. The point is that no one at that table that night was perfect except the host, Jesus Christ. Each man needed the love and forgiveness that only Jesus could offer. Everyone accepted it, except Judas.

Another key point is that nowhere in the Bible does it say that the disciples had ever been baptized or belonged to any one particular church or denomination. The Bible tells us that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, but there is no record of the disciples ever being baptized. As a matter of fact, there is no record of Jesus ever baptizing anyone. Thus, if it is necessary for a person to be baptized before they can receive communion, then I am certain that it would have been clearly stated somewhere in the Bible, but it is not.

And we need to remember that at this initial Lord's Supper, all the participants were still Jews; the Christian Church was not born until after Christ's resurrection and the receiving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The requirement that you must belong to a certain church or denomination before receiving communion is not from God, but from manmade rules by people who think they know more than God. Christ is the host who invites us to come to His Table. Therefore, we need to be careful about imposing our own personal opinions and requirements on who is eligible to come to the table.

Listen to the traditional invitation in our hymn book that is given prior to receiving communion: "Christ, our Lord, invites to His table **all** who love Him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another." And for those of us who have been around for a while and grew up in the former Methodist Episcopal Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church, you may remember this traditional invitation: "Ye that do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in His holy ways: draw near in faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession to almighty God."

Did you hear the key words in these invitations? **All**, there is no exclusion; there are no restrictions or special groups or privileged individuals. The only prerequisite is that you want to come; that you are seeking a closer relationship with the Lord; that you are seeking to know Jesus; that you feel Him nudging at your heart to come forward.

Also note that each of these invitations is personal; it is extended to personally you by Jesus Christ Himself. Thus, whether you accept it or not is between you and the Lord; nobody else has a say in it. It is an invitation of the heart, and there is not a preacher or church in this world who knows the heart of another person; only God knows. None of us has the right to judge

who can come to Christ's Table. The beauty of Holy Communion is available to all who need the love and grace that it offers.

Have you ever noticed that our invitation sums up our beliefs as Methodists? Within this invitation is our focus on loving God and loving our neighbor. As we come to receive the elements of communion, we acknowledge that we are trying to do our best in service to God and our neighbors. We are not perfect by any means, but neither were the twelve disciples.

Now because we celebrate communion on the first Sunday of every month, there is the possibility that it can become routine like other parts of our worship service. But we must never let the communion service become a mere formality, but always a tender and caring experience. It must never become something we have to do; we must never take it for granted, for it is an expression of God's grace extended to all who will accept it.

When we really stop and examine the Scriptures concerning the Lord's Supper, we can begin to appreciate its meaning and purpose in the life of the church and our lives. First, it is a gift from our Lord and Savior; one that He left us so that we will never forget what He did for us on Calvary. Without this constant reminder, we might fall into the trap of believing that we can earn our own salvation; that we deserve it; that we are entitled to it. If we do, then we may come to expect God's grace as a privilege; a right that we process. But we would be wrong; it is a gift from God to us as a result of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross where He took all our sins upon His shoulders so that we could be free from the threat and burden of sin and death forever.

When you come forward in a few moments to receive the elements, the bread will be broken off the loaf and given to you signifying the grace of God given to you. In the same way that we can't earn our salvation, we don't take the bread; it is **given** to us freely as an act of God's love that is available to all who come seeking Jesus Christ.

Communion also reflects the life of Jesus who made the acceptance and love of God available to people of all walks of life, not just His chosen disciples and the religious leaders of that time, but all people – tax collectors, fishermen, sinners, all. In the ancient Near East and in Jewish traditions, when people sat down and ate together, it was a sacred bond of hospitality and sharing of life. And thus, Jesus broke bread with anyone who was willing to sit down with Him, the Bread of Life.

One day when the Duke of Wellington was at the communion rail, an old and extremely poor man took his place beside him. An usher was about to ask him to leave, but the duke, sensing what was going on, grasped the elderly gentleman's hand and whispered: "Don't move, friend, we are all equal here." The duke understood that the ground at the foot of the cross is level and the Lord's Table is open to everyone.

When you come forward for communion, have you ever thought that this is a foretaste of eternity when some day we will all feast at that heavenly banquet with Jesus as our eternal host; when the victory we sing about is finally won, and when we have finished our earthly journey. This morning, the bread and cup point back to Christ's accomplished work, and forward to our accomplished salvation. As one of the songs in our hymn book says: "When we all get to heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be."

And when we sit down at that banquet, I bet that there will not be place cards or reserved seating or head tables. Well maybe, some people might get a special seat because of their extraordinary earthly service to the Lord such as Mother Teresa, but I doubt it. I definitely don't believe that there will be any special seating based on wealth, titles, fame, or which denomination you belonged to. Of course, there are a few churches and pastors that will disagree with this statement, but I'm still waiting for them to show me where it is in the Bible; and I'm pretty sure that I'm going to be waiting for a long time.

Here's the bottom line – Jesus taught and practiced a religion of inclusion; one where all are welcomed at His Table, to believe in Him, to worship Him, and to belong to His church. We humans, through our misguided agendas and opinions, sometimes make it a religion of exclusion, open only to certain people who think, act and dress exactly as we do; who we think deserve to be part of our group. Which do you believe, and more importantly, which do you practice? In all that we do as Christians and as a church, may we always promote and practice a religion of inclusion. Let us now prepare to come to the Lord's Table where we will receive an expression of God's love for each of us through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who invites all to come and break bread with Him. Come and be included in God's family. Amen