

First Sunday of Lent 2010

The first in a five-part Lenten sermon series on the sacraments: Holy Eucharist

How many people are thankful to be here this morning? You don't have to raise your hands – just take a minute to ponder in your heart whether or not you're thankful to be sitting here in church participating in the Holy Eucharist. I know I'm thankful – I'm thankful to be here, and I'm thankful that you all are here, and above all I'm thankful for the great gift of the Eucharist that was given to us by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ on the night before he died. It's like a legacy that he left to us – a legacy of love.

Have you ever thought about it that way?

The very word itself – Eucharist – comes from the Greek word *eucharistein* – which means “thanksgiving.” We're thankful that Jesus gave us this concrete thing to do – this very real way to celebrate his post-resurrection presence among us.

After the crucifixion, Jesus appeared to some disciples walking along a roadway. They didn't recognize him at first, but something about this man drew them closer to him and they didn't want him to leave, so they invited him into the place where they were staying. The Gospel of Luke states: “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened; then they recognized him...” In telling the others what had happened to them, they reported that he was known to them “in the breaking of the bread.”¹ The same way that he is known to us today – in the breaking of the bread at our communion table.

The Eucharist and baptism are regarded by Christians² as the two sacraments that were given to us directly by Jesus Christ. The Protestant reformers largely limit the sacraments to these two. In the hierarchy of sacramental life, even where the sacraments are considered to be seven in number³, none of the others are considered “essential” for the Christian life.

But first let's back up a little way and ask this question: What is a sacrament and how does the Church ‘make’ a sacrament? First, let's look at our catechism in the Book of Common Prayer, p. 857. Here, a sacrament is defined in this way: “The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.” Grace is further defined as “God's favor toward us, unearned and undeserved; by grace God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills.”

In order to be a valid sacrament of the Church, some conditions must be met. First, we must use the right matter – the right material substance, and that substance must be as close as possible to what we know was used in Scripture. For example, in the case of the Eucharist, we use bread and wine because that's what Jesus used. Second, we must use the right form – the particular words that Jesus used. You will notice that no matter which Eucharistic prayer we pray – A, B, C, D, from the Book of Common Prayer, or one from a supplemental liturgical text such as “Enriching our Worship,” we always say the words of Jesus: For the bread - “Take, eat. This is my Body which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.” For the wine - “Drink this, all of you: This is my Blood of the new Covenant, which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

¹ Luke 24:30, 35.

² With the exception of Quakers and other similar sects, which recognize no sacraments.

³ Baptism, Eucharist, confirmation, unction, penance, marriage, and ordination.

Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me.”⁴ In the Episcopal Church, we also must include an invocation of the Holy Spirit, asking God to make the Bread and Wine the body and blood of Christ.⁵

A sacrament is valid when it has been duly performed, with the right intentions (in other words, with the intention of the priest and people to be celebrating and receiving the Holy Eucharist), and when it is valid we believe it confers an actual blessing. What is the blessing received in the Holy Eucharist? Let’s look again at the Book of Common Prayer, p. 859. There we learn that “The benefits we receive [from Holy Communion] are the forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life.”

The Holy Eucharist is the ultimate sacrament of healing and reconciliation. All that we are and all that we have (the good, the bad, and the ugly) we bring to the Table and offer to Christ. And as we receive the Bread and the Wine made Holy by the power of the Spirit, we take into ourselves the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ offered for us.

In the Eucharist, we participate in a relationship of self-giving and self-receiving with our Lord. It is a sacred moment in our worship and it is the sacrament above all others that gives us strength, renewal, hope, and restoration in Christ.

At the Eucharistic Table, we offer and present to God our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a thoughtful, holy, and living sacrifice to God, humbly asking that we and all others who receive this Holy Communion, may be filled with God’s grace and blessing and made one with Christ.⁶

May the grace of Holy Communion give you the gift of persevering strength and the courage to love and serve the Lord. May the grace of Holy Communion help you to know that you have inherited a place in the Kingdom of God, and that Christ has left you a legacy of love. May the grace of Holy Communion give you the faith and the strength to carry on that legacy in the world and to leave a trail of love wherever you go. May the grace of Holy Communion heal you and help you to know and feel that the Spirit of Christ is with you, and in you, now and always. Amen.

⁴ Luke 22: 19b; Mt 26:27-28

⁵ BCP p. 403 for example, referring to the bread and wine: “Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.” We call this part of the Eucharistic prayer the epiclesis.

⁶ Paraphrased from Eucharistic Prayer: Rite One, BCP p.336.