The Communion Cup

A Communion message

# Scripture: 1 Cor. 10:16, 17; 11:23-26

# Key Thought: The Communion cup reminds us that as part of God’s Family, we have access to God’s presence through the blood of Jesus.

# Intro:

The great cathedrals of Europe used elaborate gold chalices encrusted with jewels to hold the wine for Catholic Mass. This was an attempt to represent in a physical way the supreme value of that which was signified by the contents of the chalice.

As Christians in the Protestant tradition rather than the Roman Catholic, we have different philosophical views of what happens when we take communion. Never-the-less, we, like our Roman Catholic brethren, place a very high value on the sacrament.

Often, we talk about the symbolism of the bread which we share in communion, but today I would like to review together why the cup that we take is so important. Let’s take as our key verses two of the verses which we read and which are part of our communion liturgy.

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. 1 Cor 11:25-26 NIV

# What does covenant mean?

The OT Hebrew word usually translated covenant, [berit] is a rather broad word that can cover many kinds of binding agreements between two parties (DNTT and ZPEB). However, the Greek word that was mostly used by the Septuagint (LXX) to translate references to God’s covenants was a more specific word that refers to a type of agreement that is handed down from the one in authority to others who benefit from the agreement. That is the word used for the Old Testament covenants that God made. Remember that there are three such covenants.

 Covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:18)

 Covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:9-21; 2 Ki. 13:23)

 Covenant with Israel at Sinai (Ex. 24)

# What does it mean to share the cup of the New Covenant?

## We identify with God’s family.

We count ourselves a part of the people of the New Covenant that God has inaugurated.

 It is a symbol of appropriating to oneself something that God has provided. God inaugurated a new agreement between God and humanity through the work of Jesus Christ. We have the privilege to become people of the new covenant by being believers in Jesus and followers of Jesus. For the purposes of taking communion, this participation is not about formal membership or liturgies performed, it is about having a heart to honor Jesus and follow him. That is why in Methodism, sharing in communion is not limited by either age or membership. It is open to all who honor God and express their desire to be part of his kingdom by sharing the bread and cup with us. I allow children to partake when their parents feel they were ready, rather than waiting until the completion of a formal class.

When we take the cup, we confess again that we are part of the family of God known as the Body of Christ. We are identified with Jesus. We are disciples of his. We are saying today, “Yes, Lord, yes! to your will and to your way!” as the song writer expressed it. In taking this cup, we confess our faith in a very physical way. We say again, I do not depend upon my works of righteousness. I depend upon what Jesus has done for me.

## We find deep meaning in the significance of Jesus’ blood.

We understand and appreciate what God has done in Jesus through the “blood of the covenant.” Jesus said in his institution of what we call communion,

 “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” Luke 22:20 NIV

So, we need to understand what that saying is about. There are two threads of meaning going back into the OT that we need to dig into to get a little bit of a handle on the true significance of Jesus blood and understand why Christians continue to talk about it.

### Blood was shed when OT covenants were ratified.

First, when you look back to all those covenants in the OT that I mentioned in the first section, you will find that at least one animal was sacrificed as each covenant was established. Blood was shed as a part of the ratification of each covenant (Noah -Gen. 8:20, 9:9; Abraham -Gen. 15:9-21; Sinai -Exodus 24:8). In referring to this fact, the writer of Hebrews says,

Even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, “This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.” In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. Heb 9:18-22 NIV

So, when Jesus refers to the “blood of the covenant” (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24), he is referring the fact that this new covenant would also be established through sacrifice, through the shedding of his own blood. Listen to the Hebrews writer again.

Then he [Christ] said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

 Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again, and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First, he says:
 “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord.
I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” Heb 10:9-16 NIV

The writer of Hebrews instructs us that in contrast to the animal sacrifices formerly used, the New covenant was established by the shedding of Jesus’ own blood. In addition, the writer clearly tells us that this New Covenant will not be a covenant of repeated ritual as much as a covenant of the Holy Spirit writing God’s laws on our hearts. It will be a new type of Covenant. It is not the new covenant simply because it replaced the old one. It is the New Covenant also because it is of an entirely new type (See Hebrews 12:18-29). What Good News that is!

When we take the cup of communion, we remember that by the shedding of his own blood, Jesus instituted the Day of Grace which we enjoy. We no longer live under the OT law but under grace (Rom. 6:15). Praise be to God!

###  The Passover Lamb

 The second key significance that we remember when we think of the blood of Jesus has to do with the history of Israel. Think about the night of the tenth plague as Moses was leading the children of Israel out of Egypt. That night, Passover lambs were sacrificed, and their blood put on the doorframes so that the tenth plague would not visit the homes of Israel. But by this same tenth plague, God procured freedom for Israel from bondage in Egypt. Still today, Israel celebrates the Passover as a memorial to that terrible and awesome night when God spared them from death and set them free instead. The key symbol of the night is the Passover Lamb. The 3rd cup of wine during the celebration is the "cup of blessing” over which thanksgiving is pronounced. It is called the cup of “redemption.” (Passover Haggadah pp. 32-36) This is the cup Jesus used to announce the new liberation; the new cause for celebration; the new covenant in his blood.

 In the NT the Bible is clear that Jesus is our “Passover Lamb.” Paul wrote, “Christ, our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). By his death Jesus has delivered us from the dominion of death and from the slavery to the enemy of our souls and has brought us into the freedom of the children of God.

*Classic Wesleyan Commentator – Adam Clarke writing on 1 Corinthians 11:23, 26*

The Eucharistic bread and wine were to be understood of the accomplishment of that of which the paschal lamb was the type-the body broken for them, the blood shed for them….As in the Passover they showed forth the bondage they had been in, and the redemption they had received from it; so in the Eucharist they showed forth the sacrificial death of Christ, and the redemption from sin derived from it.

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So, when we take the sacrament of communion, we remember that by his death, Jesus has purchased our freedom and delivered us from bondage to sin, Satan and selfishness. As the Bible puts it,

He [the Father] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
Col 1:13-14 NIV

## We have access to the presence of God.

The cup of which we partake also reminds us that as the people of the New Covenant, we have access to the very presence of God. Let me explain.

 At the time of Moses, the presence of God traveled with the people and was symbolized in the pillar of cloud and fire and then in the ark itself. After the desert tabernacle was built, it contained an inner cubic room called the Holy of Holies where the ark was kept. God had said to Moses,

Place the cover on top of the ark and put in the ark the tablets of the covenant law that I will give you. There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the covenant law, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites. Ex 25:21-22 NIV

The Bible later records that Moses heard the voice of God from that very spot (Num. 7:89). After the death of Moses, the designated High Priest had access to the presence of God in that Holy of Holies once each year on Yom Kippur. When the temple was built, this Most Holy Place was walled off from the rest of the temple by a heavy curtain. When Jesus died, the curtain of the temple of Jesus’ day was torn from top to bottom. This was very symbolic indicating to us all that access to the presence of God was no longer restricted as it formerly had been. The NT book of Hebrews explains why; Jesus had completed his work. Symbolically speaking, he had entered the presence of God in heaven bringing the perfect sacrifice, his own lifeblood.

He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. Heb 9:12-13 NIV

The earthly Jewish High priest had to repeat his animal sacrifices every year and they were never completely effective. In contrast, Jesus’ sacrifice was completely effective forever and never needs to be repeated.

The greatest evidence of the effectiveness of Jesus’ sacrifice is that we have been granted access to the presence of God. The book of Hebrews encourages us to think of the sacrificial work of Jesus as like a Heavenly High Priest who entered the very throne room of God on our behalf and opened the way for us to follow.

For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. Heb 9:24 NIV

The Bible is building a concept for us from the physical realities of the OT system in order that we can better understand the result. And what is the amazing result of this work of Jesus?

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Heb 10:19-25 NIV

Whenever we pick up this cup of grape juice it is a powerful reminder for us that Jesus has done the heavy lifting. One of the gifts he has given to us, which we celebrate and take advantage of even as we gather is the privilege of access to God in prayer. When we take the cup in our hands, we remember that by his blood, Jesus made it possible for us seek God in prayer and be heard. That is one more reason to make these moments of communion, moments of personal and corporate prayer.

God hears our prayers because of the shed blood of Jesus!