

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on October 2, 2022

ONE GREAT CONSTANT

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you."

I Corinthians 11:23-24

This fall we have been focusing on times the Christian Church has faced dramatic change. On World Communion Sunday, I thought we might focus on the one constant through all of Christian History. One great constant has been being fed by the presence of the Risen Christ in the Lord's Supper.

Most scholars believe the books of the New Testament were not written in the order that they were placed in the Bible. The letters of Paul are believed to be the most ancient of the texts in the New Testament. The first Gospels were written some ten to twenty years later. This means that the first words of Jesus to be written down are found in I Corinthians. Jesus is quoted as saying **"This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."**

All through the almost two thousand-year history of the Christian movement, Jesus followers have gathered around a table to receive the Lord's Supper.

Now while it is the one constant, there have been many different ways that Christians have received the bread and wine. The bread is not always the same. Some have used unleavened bread, others big loaves, others wafers. Some Christian groups use wine, others use grape juice.

Some people have come forward to receive and others served in the pews. Some kneel while receiving, others stand and others sit. Some receive the elements separately and others take communion by intinction in which the elements are combined. Through most of Christian History a common cup was used by all. But then according to the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, the elders of Central Presbyterian Church of Rochester, New York, appointed their pastor, Rev. Dr. H. H. Stebbins, and fellow elder and physician, Dr. Charles Forbes, to "design a plan for individual cups" at the urging of the Rochester Pathological Society. The same article reported that a plan was devised and Central Presbyterian first used individual cups on May 13, 1894. A few months after this service, the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* stated that "Central Presbyterian Church...has the distinction of being the first church in the world to adopt the use of the individual chalices in the celebration of the Holy Communion". Dr. Forbes went on to found the Sanitary Communion Outfit Company.

While the elements and ways of serving have differed, the Lord's Supper remains a constant.

Churches have not only served Communion in different ways; the Eucharist has been understood in a variety of ways. For almost 500 hundred years the Eucharist has

been a source of division. The divisions over the Lord's Supper are not just found between Roman Catholics and the rest of us. We Protestants have also fought among ourselves over the meaning of Communion. In the year 1529, in the midst of the Reformation, Philip of Hesse invited the leading reformers to his castle at Marburg to see if unity could be found. Luther and other leaders came from Switzerland, Germany and France. The discussions were frank and open with all sides seeking compromise. That is until the day came to discuss the Lord's Supper.

The story is told that on the day set aside to discuss Communion, Martin Luther entered the meeting room and took out a knife and carved into the table words in Latin which mean "This is My Body." Needless to say, this did not get the discussions off on a positive note. While Luther was willing to compromise on many things, he would not back away from his understanding of how Jesus is truly present in the sacrament.

The strange thing about all of this controversy is that the differences primarily concern the mechanics of the Lord's Supper and not the reality. Almost every Christian body, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist and Presbyterian proclaim a belief in the real presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper.

What they disagree about are the mechanics. What I mean by mechanics is that the churches disagree over how Christ comes to be present not what the Lord's Supper means to the Christian believer. The theories such as transubstantiation, consubstantiation and memorialism are all attempts to explain how Christ comes to be present at the table and not what his presence means to us.

It is helpful for us to realize that before all the focus on mechanics the Lord's Supper was a source of Christian unity. It was at the heart of Christian life. We can learn from the experience of Justin Martyr.

Justin was born sometime between 90 and 105AD in a town now called Nablus in Syrian Palestine. He came from a Romanized family. He was a gentile. As a young man he was attracted to Philosophy. He was a seeker of truth. There were many different religions and schools of philosophy floating around the ancient world. Justin was attracted to many of them. He dabbled with the Stoics, the Peripatetics and others. He became for a time a determined Platonist. Then a wise old man led him to the truth of Jesus. Justin tells us, "Immediately a fire was kindled in my soul."

From then on Justin became a teacher of Christianity as the true philosophy. He made his way to Rome as a teacher. Early in the reign of Emperor Marcus Aurelius he fell afoul of the authorities because of his refusal to sacrifice to the Roman Gods. He and six others were scourged and beheaded. Thus, his death makes him a martyr, a witness to the faith.

Justin left many writings that give us insight into the life of the Christian Church in the second century. In his book the First Apology we find these words:

On Sunday we have a common assembly of all our members, whether they live in the city or the outlying districts. The recollections of the apostles or

the writings of the prophets are read, as long as there is time. When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly speaks to us; he urges everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard in the readings. Then we all stand up together and pray.

On the conclusion of our prayer, bread and wine and water are brought forward. The president offers prayers and gives thanks to the best of his ability, and the people give assent saying, "Amen". The Eucharist is distributed, everyone present communicates, and the deacons take it to those who are absent.

Is it not remarkable how the pattern of worship is like ours? The heart of worship still is reading Scripture, sermon, prayers and the Eucharist. The deacons were already taking communion to shut ins in the second century.

It is clear that the Lord's Supper was from the very beginning at the heart of Christian Worship. Justin believed that in taking the bread and cup one came into the very presence of God. He wrote:

We do not consume the Eucharistic bread and wine as if it were ordinary food and drink, for we have been taught that as Jesus Christ our Savior became a man of flesh and blood by the power of the Word of God, so also the food that our flesh and blood assimilates for its nourishment become the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus by the power of his own words contained in the prayer of thanksgiving.

One of the mistakes we make is reading these words through a modern lens. I do not believe that any of the early Christian writers argued for a single understanding of how grace comes to us in the sacrament. That is an argument from a 1000 years later. Justin wants us to take seriously that God comes to us in the mystery of the Lord's Supper, Justin and the early writers affirm that somehow in a way we cannot fully understand, Christ comes to us in the Eucharist.

From the first Century to today Communion is at the heart of Christian worship for Jesus comes to us in a special way.

I have heard some people ask what is this all about. The Lord's Supper seems to be a lot of mumbo jumbo that has no relevance in the modern age. I am not going to participate unless I understand.

But the truth is we will never understand and as C.S. Lewis reminds us the command is not to take and understand – the command is to take and eat. And when we take and eat – in some way we cannot explain or understand – grace comes to us.

In the Gospel of Luke, the risen Jesus journeyed with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They did not know who he was. But they invited him to supper and while they were at table he took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to them and their eyes were opened and they recognized Him. This can happen to us as well. The

real presence of Christ in the Eucharist means that you and I can know the presence of Jesus in the sacrament.

The Lord's Supper is more than recalling a meal that Jesus had with his disciples. When we eat the bread and drink the cup, in some way we cannot explain the Risen Christ reveals himself to us. Almost all Christians, the children of Constantinople, Rome, Wittenberg, Canterbury and Geneva believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. We may not agree on how it happens, but we all come to the table expecting to be fed by the presence of the Risen Christ.

Let us come to the table.

Let us recommit ourselves to Christ's rule in our lives.

Let us come to the table to experience the Risen Christ.

We may not know how this happens,
We may not be able to explain it in words,
But Jesus comes to us in a unique way.

This is the truth that the founder of the Reformed movement John Calvin proclaimed when 500 years ago he wrote **"Christ is the only food of our soul and therefore our Heavenly Father invites us to Christ, that, refreshed by partaking of him, we may repeatedly gather strength until we shall have reached heavenly immortality."**

This is the same truth that Pope Francis taught a week ago, when he traveled to the ancient Italian city of Matera. Last Sunday Francis said, **"Brothers, sisters, from the city of Matera, this 'city of bread,' I would like to tell you: Let us return to Jesus. Let us return to the Eucharist,"**

"Let us return to the taste of bread because while we are hungry for love and hope, or we are broken by the travails and sufferings of life, Jesus becomes food that feeds us and heals us."

So today we become one with Justin, Calvin, Pope Francis
and all Christians across time and space
in coming to the table,
not all in the same manner,
not because we understand it all,
but rather because we are hungry for God's
love.

Hungry for God's love which is present in the mystery of the Eucharist.