

Scripture

Psalm 23

1 The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

3 he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

4 Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

23 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, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for[g] you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sermon:

Last week the question under consideration was 'who do you say I am?' If you remember, Jesus posed this question to his disciples as they walked down the road.

The short version of last week's sermon was that the key word in the question is 'who.' Our status as Christians relies on who Jesus is to us, and our relationship with him. It's not what we believe, but in whom we believe that is the central confession of our faith.

What we believe can vary, and has varied over time. What hasn't changed, and what has held us together as a cohesive community over thousands of years is Peter's answer to Jesus' question. 'You are the Christ – the anointed one of God.' This truth is the rock upon which

Christ's church is built, and our very designation as Christian points back to the who; who is the cornerstone upon which our world is constructed.

Once we've settled that most important of questions and recognized Jesus as God's own anointed Son, then a follow up question arises. Why do we do the things that we do?

We do many things as a church. To most outsiders, and even some within the church, those things we do are what give us our identity.

If you ask most people what defines a Christian they will respond by saying 'Christians go to church, they pray, they read the bible, they dunk their babies in water. They'll say a lot more than that; some of it will be uncomplimentary, some of those harder things may even be true. But most will identify Christians by what do collectively, and individually.

So, if we are known, both inside and outside the church, by the things that we do, what do we know about those things we do? Why do we read the bible, why do we worship, why do we talk about eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the one who we say that we adore and follow?

Perhaps many of us haven't really thought too deeply about why we do the things we do. It's just what we do – it's who we are. Our grandparents did it, our parents did it, we do it, and we expect our children and our grandchildren to do them as well.

But that's not good enough. Jesus calls us to a life of fullness and abundance, not drudgery and toil. All the things that we do together and individually ought to add to our spiritual growth. If not, then we're not doing things right, which means that we need to return to the question 'why do we do the things we do?'

A quick example was brought to my attention this week by Keith Main. He asked why there is a delay of a minute or so between the bible being brought into the sanctuary at the beginning of the service and the choir processing in. It's just empty time that serves no purpose.

He reminded me that it used to be that the bible was brought up and placed on the pulpit, and so to avoid a traffic jam of people trying to move both ways through a small space the choir would wait until the way was clear. But now the bible is placed on the communion table; there is no longer any practical reason for the wait, yet we have continued to have this awkward pause in our worship until Keith asked 'why do we do the things that we do?'

It's not an irreverent question, nor is it disrespectful. Asking why sincerely will always lead us to a deeper understanding and a closer walk with God.

This week we will direct our why towards Communion, or the Lord's Supper.

The Christian Eucharist, or Communion, is an odd celebration. People of all faiths and cultures gather for celebratory feasts; sharing bread and wine is not at all unique to the church. What is unique to our celebration is that we say that we are eating and drinking God's son.

The act has become quite ritualized and familiar, so we tend not to be shocked by what we say we are doing, but just imagine that you are hearing of this for the first time.

In John's gospel Jesus said 'I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.'

It sounds as though Jesus was telling his followers that he was going to die, and that he expected his followers to eat his body afterward. Those gathered there began to argue amongst themselves, saying 'how can this man give us his flesh to eat?' To which Jesus replied 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.'

Because of this, the scripture tells us, many of the disciples turned back and no longer followed Jesus.

This is a very hard teaching. Was Jesus really speaking of cannibalism? Remember, to Jews, even touching a dead body makes one unclean for seven days, and to eat a human being was as horrific to them as it would be to us. Perhaps even more so, since the bible does indicate that during the extended siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar that some of those trapped inside the city walls did have to resort to the unthinkable to survive.

It is into this context that Jesus spoke of offering his own flesh and blood to be consumed; it is little wonder that many turned away. The rumours of Christians as cannibals persisted, and were often invoked to support various persecutions in the years to follow, as Rome solidified its hold on Palestine and the surrounding areas.

Now, we all know that we are not cannibals, that next week when we celebrate Communion we will not be eating the flesh and drinking the blood of another human being. What then are we doing?

We're certainly not going to be doing it because we're hungry – as far as feasts go our Communion is pretty meagre, especially in comparison to the Communions celebrated in Corinth. So why do we do the things that we do? If we aren't eating Jesus directly, and we're not filling our bellies to satisfy our bodily hunger, what are we hoping to accomplish? Are we just adding ten minutes and a little pomp and ceremony to the service?

It's written on the Communion table itself – a direct quote from Jesus. 'Do this in remembrance of me.'. We are remembering.

When Jesus spoke those words of institution, by which I mean those famous words that instituted the ritual of communion, 'Take, eat – do this in remembrance of me,' he was speaking in the context of a Passover meal.

The Passover meal was a remembrance of the original Passover that the Jews ate while the angel of God was going throughout Egypt, bringing desolation upon the houses of the Egyptians. At a traditional Passover meal, the head of the household would explain the meaning of the meal – why they ate unleavened bread, bitter herbs, and a young lamb. Each item represented something important for the Israelites to remember.

Jesus, as host of the Passover meal with his disciples on the night before he was killed, would have been fulfilling that same responsibility of explaining to those gathered the significance of each aspect of the meal so that in the future the disciples would look back on the night and remember.

The function of Communion is for us to remember. Some time ago I spoke to you of remembering, and a different way to interpret the word, keeping in mind the idea of embodiment.

This idea originally came from a professor of mine in a different context. He was speaking about the forgotten people of Cuba. Living is hard in Cuba, and there are people who leave, seeking a better life in the nearby United States. For many of the parents left behind, the pain is too great so they pretend as though the children are not gone, but dead, or even never to have existed at all. The children are remembered no longer.

My professor likened the family to a body, certainly a biblical image, and spoke of remembering those lost children as an act of re-attaching those severed members to the body – keeping them present in spirit though they may be physically distant.

The same thing applies to our remembrance of Jesus through the act of Communion – even more so since the church is described not only as the bride of Christ, but as the body of Christ on earth.

Every time that we eat, every time that we drink, we are re-remembering the body, reattaching ourselves to this sacred community. By remembering Jesus, we are bringing our attention back to the very cornerstone of our faith, the question of who. Who is Jesus? Who are we?

Because the whole focus of the ritual of Communion is who, the what and the how become somewhat immaterial.

Some congregations sip wine from a common cup, others, like us, use individual cups. Interestingly both traditions have the same reason for why they do what they do. Silver naturally has antibiotic properties, which is why you will find some band-aids now contain

silver. Alcohol, of course, is also an antiseptic. So the combination of silver and wine makes for a fairly germ-free way to share the cup.

In our tradition, shortly following Louis Pasteur's discoveries of microbes and germs, individual cups became the norm. So, silver and wine, or individual cups and juice, both are different methods to ensure sanitary sharing of the meal. Neither is better than the other in terms of being holier – each practice evolved to suit its time and place.

Bread, wafers, crackers, wine, juice. The elements on the table can take many forms because, as the Living Faith tells us 'The grace effective in the sacraments comes not from any power in them but from the work of the Holy Spirit.'

That is why we can celebrate Communion in many different ways – it comes down to cultural and community preference. The power of the Lord's Supper is in the remembrance and the returning to that central question of who Jesus is, and who we are.

That is why we practice what is called an open table here at St. Paul's. What that means is that everyone is invited to participate as we tell the story again of who Jesus is and who we are in relation to him.

You don't have to be a member here to eat with us. All who believe are welcome. All who are trying to believe are welcome. Children are also invited to the table.

Once we understand that the act of communion is an act of remembrance of Christ, and a remembering of his body, then all that is required is a sincere desire to be a part of that body.

Keep that meaning in mind next week as we celebrate the Eucharist. Look around you as you eat and drink, and remember that in eating and drinking you are declaring a bond between yourself with all the people around you – the bond of Christ.

It is a deeply meaningful moment, to be in the presence of Jesus while in the presence of all these other people. It is a moment of witness; a moment of peace, and a moment of power.

To quote one of our very own poets, who you will find in the current News 'n Views,
As you stand there spellbound
at the things that he can do,
That's the time you get the feeling
God is standing there with you.

Amen.