

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

On that Thursday evening long ago, when Jesus sat at supper with his friends, he was under terrible stress. During that week, he had been harassed by Pharisees and scribes, the religious leaders of Jerusalem were clearly trying to find some cause to kill him, he was being stalked by shadowy figures who were plotting against him, and, as we are told, he knew already the manner of his death, that most brutal and painful execution by crucifixion. He knew that within hours he would sacrifice himself for the sake of people whom he didn't even know. He should have been exasperated and terrified. He should have been weeping and shuddering with fear. But what does he do instead? He gives thanks! He thanks God for his friends, for the ones who have been entrusted to him. He takes a loaf of bread, raises it at the table, and gives thanks to God! He lifts his cup of wine in the sight of the disciples, and gives thanks! And then passes the bread and his own cup around the table.

The word "Eucharist" in Biblical Greek means 'thanksgiving', and that is the word we use to describe our primary worship service on Sunday, the Lord's Day, the day of Resurrection, the weekly remembrance of Easter morning. In this service, sometimes historically known as the 'Mass', we are called to give thanks. We give thanks to God after each reading from Holy Scripture. We give thanks for the forgiveness of our sins. We give thanks for the privilege of praying for others. We give thanks for our salvation through Christ Jesus. And we give thanks for the opportunity to be at table with Jesus like the disciples were all though years ago. And when we do, we curiously call it a 'sacrifice'. In our Eucharistic prayers before receiving Holy Communion, we say that we come before God to make our *sacrifice* of praise and thanksgiving. At the Last Supper, Jesus is about to sacrifice his life for the sake of others out of pure love; and we say we will join him in sacrifice by taking the time and effort to make sure we give thanks?! Doesn't sound like much of a sacrifice, does it?! But it does describe an attitude which is faithful and humble, thankful and appropriate.

The first time, chronologically, we hear of Holy Communion in the Bible texts is in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. He wrote that letter in the mid-50s, about twenty years after Jesus's death and resurrection. Then Mark's gospel, with the reference to the Last Supper, was written about ten years later, in the mid-60s. And then, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles were written maybe twenty years after that. So, it sounds like Eucharist services were already a regular Christian practice within a few years after the signature supper when Jesus asked the disciples to continue the practice in remembrance of him. For fact, Paul writes to the Corinthians to scold them for the way they have been celebrating the Eucharist! Not because of the liturgical form or language they were using, but because of their attitude. He has heard that they have not so much been humbly thankful, not making a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, but rather have treated the Holy Communion as a privilege, and even a privilege which was due to some more than others! It had become a way to distinguish hierarchy and status, not a service where each came before the Lord with equal humility and gratitude.

A hundred years later the author Justin Martyr wrote about the practices of the crazy Christians, and he described the communion service, or Eucharist, as it was being used in the churches of the day. It had evolved to look much like the service we are having this morning. There was even a sermon given by the leader of the congregation! But there were as yet no written liturgies, no Book of Common prayer, no Papal doctrines, and so the people worshiped from their hearts alone. They had come to find that when they got into this 'bubble' of thankfulness along with Jesus, marvelous and powerful things could happen. When they aligned their intentions with those of God, the Holy Spirit filled them with joy and vigor. Along with the celebration of Baptism, Holy Communion had become a central element of their faithful communities. It identified them as being in Christ, with Christ, for Christ, through Christ, and because of Christ (choose your favorite preposition!) As part of the Eucharist service of thanksgiving, it brought them together with Jesus in

unexpected and remarkable ways. It became not an obligation they had to fulfill on a Sunday morning, but something they craved because of the spiritual nourishment it gave them. They left feeling inspired and ready to witness God's love to the world. And then they had coffee hour.

Sadly, as the years passed and the church became more formally institutionalized, even becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire, Holy Communion suffered some unfortunate side-effects. Liturgies were written to formalize the service, and were treated eventually like incantations. If one said the correct words in the right order at the consecrated altar, then Jesus would magically appear. The Communion service, which had earlier evolved with the aid of the Holy Spirit, now seemed to somehow devolve into ritual and customary. It became less about giving thanks than about conjuring Jesus. And fewer and fewer common people felt welcome at the Lord's Table, until by medieval times the communion was generally received only by the priest and a few other dignitaries, with their backs to the people as they stood at the altar and raised the bread and the chalice of wine high enough for everyone to see the miracle. The elements, the liturgy said, had indeed been transformed into the actual flesh and blood of Jesus himself. There are old stories about people running from one church to another in a city just to see that magic happen in each place.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Christian churches had realized their unfortunate error, however, and thankfully most all denominations, including the Roman Catholics, the Episcopalians, and the various protestant denominations have rediscovered the spiritual power of Holy Communion. It has returned to the realm of God's kingdom, not the magic kingdom. It is considered a sacrament, one of those moments in life which radiates holiness. One of those special times when we get into that bubble with Jesus, aligning our intentions with his, when miracles (not magic) freely happen. We come to the table like the disciples did at the Last Supper, full of confusion and problems, and find that Jesus wants to share with us...share his attitude, his thankfulness, his essence, his joy, and his life with us. And powerful things can happen. It's all very mysterious. In fact, we nickname the bread and the wine the "holy mysteries", and no matter how long I talk this morning, no matter how many facts and pompous phrases I lay on you, I will not be able to adequately solve the mystery for you. You'll have to see for yourself.

In the year 1529, Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli met at the University of Marburg to discuss their theological differences. Both had become powerful figures in the Reformation movement. Luther, a German, was, of course, the founder of the new Lutheran church, and Zwingli, from Switzerland, became known as the father of the Reformed church tradition. They were both the same age, had come from peasant stock, had attended famous universities, spoke German, and were highly regarded throughout Europe. When they met, all of European Christendom was watching, including BTW the young English church reformers who would come to establish the Anglican Church, from which our Episcopal Church was born. Of the fifteen theological points Luther and Zwingli discussed that week, they found agreement on fourteen. But the one which stuck in their craw was Holy Communion. They found that they could not adequately explain it to each other, not enough anyway to persuade each other about their opinions. As the world watched, they had to come away agreeing that, while something spiritually powerful was happening in the Eucharist, it defied reasonable description. It was a mystery. A holy mystery. No matter how many different doctrines scholars could come up with, one had to experience it for oneself.

As we join together with Christ this morning, as we commune and communicate with Christ today, we will ask the Holy Spirit to help us find that the bread and the wine will each be for us the essence of Jesus. Receive both, or receive just one, and welcome Christ into your life with thanksgiving. And remember, we do this together. The Spirit connects us one with another and all of us with the risen Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit helps us become a community of faith, a church, a parish, and members of the Body of Christ. Though we are many, we become one Body as we partake of one bread and drink our share from one source. But come to the supper with humble thanks, that the joy of Christ may be completed in us. Amen.