

Connecting With God Communion

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This morning we continue our series of messages entitled "Connecting with God." Our last series of messages entitled "Impossible Dreams" encouraged us to join with God in his work of transforming the world—restoring it to what he intended it to be. I hope each of you will do something before Thanksgiving to make a difference for the kingdom of God. As we begin to engage in the problems and suffering of others, it is easy to become overwhelmed and drained—especially if we try to deal with the problems in our own strength. I purposely chose this series of messages to follow up Impossible Dreams. In order to live out those dreams, we must live in the power of God's Spirit. We must stay connected closely to God. Our ministry to others needs to come from an overflow of God's love and grace in our lives. During the next few weeks we will look at ways to stay connected with God. This morning we will see how communion connects us with God.

Our scripture reading describes the last supper that Jesus shared with his disciples before his death. It was on this night that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper.

Matthew 26:19-29

So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover.

²⁰When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. ²¹And while they were eating, he said, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me."

²²They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely not I, Lord?"

²³Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me."

²⁴The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

²⁵Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely not I, Rabbi?"

Jesus answered, "Yes, it is you."

²⁶While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

²⁷Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom."

The majority of the founders of the world's religions died peacefully at a ripe old age.

Abraham, the father of Judaism, died at the age of 175. "Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years." (Genesis 25:8) Buddha died at the age of 80 surrounded by his family. Confucius died at the age of 72 peacefully in his home town.

Mohammed, the founder of Islam, died in his 60's after making a final pilgrimage to the holy

site of Mecca. Jesus Christ died at the age of 33 after only three years of ministry. He was stripped naked, brutally tortured by his enemies and abandoned by his friends.

When we hear that most of the founders of religions died peacefully, that works! They had a long life and died surrounded by family and friends. Most of us would say we liked that—a religion that lets you end life peacefully. Jesus died young and violently. Why would anyone look at the death of Jesus and say “I want that religion!”

And yet the followers of Jesus adopted as the symbol of their religion the instrument of torture used to kill him—the cross. As a favorite hymn proclaims, “It is an emblem of suffering and shame.” The historical fact of what crosses represent makes people shudder and withdraw. Jesus’ explanation of the crucifixion draws people to follow him and even die for him. For Christians the cross is a symbol of the transforming power at work in their lives. Isn’t it interesting that the Christian symbol is not an empty tomb—a symbol of life—but rather the Christian symbol is a cross—the symbol of death?

At the Last Supper Jesus explained to his followers the meaning of the cross. First, Jesus said that his death is central. In Matthew 26:19 we discover the kind of meal Jesus was having with his disciples. It was the Passover meal. What is the Passover? It is a feast that recalls Israel’s deliverance from the oppressive slavery to the Pharaoh of Egypt. The night before they were set free from slavery, they ate this meal. Jewish people still observe it to this day. Our family was fortunate to be invited to a Jewish home to experience the Passover. It is a very impressive experience. If you have any Jewish friends, see if you can get an invitation. A part of the Passover tradition is to invite guests to join you for the meal and hear the story of the Exodus. The head of the house presides over the meal. The Passover is a meal that needs an explanation. The one presiding explains the symbolism of the meal. He talks about the experiences of that night in Egypt when the Israelites were delivered from slavery by the hand of God.

During the Last Supper, Jesus presides over the meal. According to custom, the presider takes the bread and says: “This is the bread of affliction which our fathers ate in the wilderness.” It was a reminder of the suffering of the Israelites. Instead Jesus said: “This is the bread of my affliction—this is my body.” The disciples must have been very curious about what Jesus meant. Jesus explained to them that they are eating this meal on the night before an even greater deliverance will occur. “Tonight God is going to deliver you from far greater enemies than the Egyptian Pharaoh. God is going to deliver you from the power of sin and death. My death is central. It is the focal point of history. Everything has been preparation for this night.”

Jesus tells his disciples to continue observing this feast with a new meaning. Rather than remembering the Passover, he says to them, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Something greater than the Passover is happening tonight. Jesus commands us to remember his death—not his birth, or his miracles or even his resurrection—but his death. The resurrection of Jesus makes no sense without his death. We cannot understand the meaning of Jesus without his cross. The death of Jesus is central to the Christian faith.

Jesus also explains the purpose of his death. Why did Jesus die? During the meal Jesus took a cup and said: “This is my blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. “Poured out for many...” This means that Jesus’ blood is poured out on behalf of, instead of your blood and my blood. Jesus says that he is offering his life as a substitute for ours.

This becomes clear when we reflect on the meaning of the Passover meal. There were three primary elements to the meal. One was unleavened bread. Unleavened bread recalled that the Israelites left Egypt in haste. They did not have time to let the bread rise, so they baked it without yeast. Wine was also a part of the feast—4 cups symbolizing different parts of the Passover experience. The main course was a lamb. The Egyptian Pharaoh had

refused all of the requests God made through Moses to let his people go. In order to deliver his people, God sent an angel of judgment throughout the land of Egypt. This angel of judgment would cause the death of all the first born sons in the land. However, God provided a way for first born sons to be spared. A lamb could be slain and eaten for the Passover meal. The blood of that lamb would be smeared on the doorposts of the house. The angel of judgment would “pass over” any house that had the blood of a lamb on the doorposts.

God made this substitution available to everyone. It was non-discriminatory. God does not say that the death angel will pass over the homes of good people and kill only the first born sons of bad people. God does not say that the angel will pass over all the Jewish homes and kill only the first born sons of Egyptians. The death angel would pass over any home with the blood of the lamb on it. And the death angel would cause the death of the first sons of any family without the blood of the lamb. Every household is subject to the judgment of death—Jewish and Egyptian. The Bible makes it clear that we are all sinners—we have all cut ourselves off from God and decided to run our lives our own way. Since we have cut ourselves off from the source of life, the consequence is death. The death angel symbolizes the consequences of sin on us all. We all deserve to die. That night the first born sons of any family would die unless they had substituted a lamb for the life of the son. Each family had to admit that they deserved death because of their choice to separate themselves from God. Then they could accept the offer of the lamb as a substitute for the life of the first son. Every household in Egypt including Jewish households either had a dead son or a dead lamb that night. As every first born son looked at the lamb, he knew that lamb had died in his place.

Jesus picks up the cup and the bread, but there is no mention of a lamb at the Last Supper. Why? Because Jesus is the Lamb of God who gives his life for all of us. Jesus

substitutes his life in my place and your place. This is where Christianity is different from every other religion in the world. Every other religion says that there is something we can do to make ourselves acceptable to God. The Christian faith says there is nothing we can do to make ourselves acceptable to God. Every other religion focuses on what we do to earn God's approval. The Christian faith focuses on what God has done to provide for our forgiveness. It is not about what we do for God. It is about what God did for us. God loved us so much that he gave his first born son as a substitute for us. He took the death penalty that we deserved so that we could be forgiven of all our sins and experience a relationship with God.

The third thing we learn about the meaning of the cross is that we have to make it ours. Jesus took the bread and broke it and said eat this. He took the cup and said drink this. As they ate and drank, the disciples participated in the death of Jesus. When Jesus died; they died with him. When Jesus rose from the dead; they rose with him to a new life. When we take the bread and the cup, we make the cross our own. It is not enough to believe that Jesus died for the sins of the world. I must believe that Jesus died for my sins. I must admit that I need a Savior. I trust that the price that Jesus paid upon the cross is enough to forgive all my sins.

The Greek word for communion is "Eucharist" which means "thanksgiving." When we eat this bread and drink this cup we give thanks for what Jesus did for us. I give thanks that Jesus loved me so much that he substituted his life for mine. I thank him for dying for me.

Communion is a means of grace—a way that God connects with us. You are given the bread and cup. It is God's gift of love. All you can do is receive it with thanksgiving. God passes over your sins and my sins because Jesus gave his life for us. Let us share in his body and blood with thanksgiving.