

As we are going to celebrate the Lord's Supper today I thought that it was time for a sermon about the Lord's Supper. We will do that by looking at Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper as we find it in the Gospel according to Matthew. My hope is that by having at least some of the facets of the meaning of the Lord's Supper fresh in our minds, our celebration of the Lord's Supper will be more rich and encouraging.

So Jesus knows that he is about to give his life for the salvation of his disciples and for all his people. The institution of the Lord's Supper takes place in the story just before Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. And in this context Jesus performs a number of actions and speaks a number of words that are intended to establish a symbolic meal that will be repeated in the church regularly until Jesus returns. Jesus does not spell that out here in this passage, but if we take all of the relevant passages together we understand that that was Jesus' intention.

We can get at the significance of the Lord's Supper by thinking of its meaning for the original disciples. Clearly he intended that it would help them. Clearly he intended it to help them receive the blessings that he would obtain for them by his death. There is a close connection between Jesus' death and the meaning of the Lord's Supper. The bread is broken. The wine points to blood which is poured out. The symbols point to Jesus' death on the cross. And the actions of the Lord's Supper – Jesus giving and the disciples receiving – point to Jesus offering himself as crucified and the disciples receiving Jesus as crucified. It is an acting out of the transaction that is at the heart of salvation. In the symbols and symbolic actions Jesus offers himself as the one who would die on the cross for their salvation and the disciples receive Jesus as the one who died for their salvation.

And if we imagine the scene that is described in these verses, we see and hear Jesus offering the bread and the wine and saying, "Take eat: this is my body." And "Drink of it All of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." If we think about these simple actions and words and symbols it is clear that Jesus is seeking to impress upon his disciples that he is offering himself to them as the one who would die for them. The broken bread and the poured out wine symbolize Jesus in his death and all that he would accomplish by his death. He is offering himself and everything that he would achieve by his death to his disciples.

And if you ask, "Why would Jesus do such a thing?", it is clear that he wants to assure them he was going to the cross for them. He was offering himself to them as the one who would die for them and be their Saviour.

It is important to see that the symbols of bread and wine point to Jesus himself. The symbols do not point to a bundle of blessings – the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, renewal of life. The symbols force us to keep Jesus and his blessings together. Jesus and the gifts of salvation are inseparable. We receive Jesus as our Saviour. We receive Jesus and with him we receive what he accomplished for us by his death. Salvation is a relationship with Jesus. We receive him as our Saviour and with him we receive forgiveness and eternal life and all the rest. The Lord's Supper makes that very clear.

And if you imagine the whole scene and wonder why Jesus would institute this symbolic meal – it is clear that he wants to impress upon his disciples that he was giving himself to them as the crucified one. Pretty soon he would be arrested, tried, and crucified. It's not likely that they got much comfort from their memory of the Lord's Supper until after Pentecost. But once the Holy Spirit was poured out and gave them understanding of Jesus' death they could remember the Lord's Supper and think of Jesus offering himself to them in the symbols of the broken bread and poured out wine. Following his instructions they could reenact the Lord's Supper with one of Jesus' representatives playing the part of Jesus. You can see that at the simplest level in the Lord's Supper Jesus wants to reassure his disciples that what he did on the cross he did for them. He was offering himself to them as the one who died for them.

If we think about the very basic reason that Jesus gave us the Lord's Supper it is to reassure us that he really does give himself to us. You don't have to be a great theologian to understand that. Like so many other things having to do with the gospel – the basic ideas are very simple while at the same time there is enough depth to keep theologians busy for a very long time. You just imagine Jesus with a broken piece of bread and holding it out to his disciples and saying – "Take, eat; this is my body" and the cup of wine symbolizing his blood – "Drink of it all of you." And you imagine him doing the same for us when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. He wants to assure you that he really and truly does give himself to you in the symbols.

What this assumes is that we are prone to wonder whether Jesus really does give himself to us as our Saviour. It is possible to doubt that. Sometimes we get some insight into how sinful we really are and we may wonder how it is possible for us to be forgiven. Sometimes we may think that the gospel is too good to be true and we wonder whether it is really for us. And in order to reassure his people that he really and truly does give himself to us, Jesus has ordained the Lord's Supper. He wants to make it crystal clear. Besides telling us by words, Jesus goes further and says in effect – let me make it concrete – let me act it out for you – let me show you that I really and truly give myself to you.

Now, of course, the question comes to mind, "Does Jesus say this to everybody?" And the answer is clearly, "no." There needs to be some measure of faith. We need to interpret the Lord's Supper in the light of the whole gospel. Those with whom Jesus celebrated the first Lord's Supper were his disciples. He did not serve the Lord's Supper to the crowds. The feeding of the 5000, for instance, did not have the same meaning as the Lord's Supper. John 3:18 says, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." Jesus is not assuring unbelievers that they are truly receiving him if they physically receive the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper is for those who believe in Jesus. But the assumption behind the Lord's Supper is that those who do believe need to be regularly reassured. Faith can be weaker or stronger. And the Lord's Supper assumes that all of God's people regularly need their faith in Jesus to be strengthened and nurtured. This is why we need to hear the gospel regularly preached, but alongside of that Jesus has given us the Lord's Supper

so that we can see the symbols and the symbolic actions that are intended to reassure us that Jesus really and truly does give himself to us as our saviour.

The Heidelberg Catechism expresses this in a helpful way when it says in answer 75 that in the Lord's Supper Christ has promised that "as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup shared with me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross."

We have been looking at the fact that right on the surface of the symbols, actions and words of the Lord's Supper is the idea that Jesus wants to assure his people that he really and truly gives himself to them as the one who died for them. The focus here is on Jesus giving. He offers the bread and the wine – pointing to his offering of himself to us. Let's look now on the receiving side of the symbolism. Jesus tells his disciples to eat the bread and to drink of the cup.

This requires actions on our part. The Lord's Supper points to the fact that all that the bread and the cup stand for must be received. We are told to take and eat. We are told to drink of the cup. As one commentator on this passage puts it, the commands to eat and drink, "introduce the concept of a personal participation in the effects of [Jesus'] death." (France, p. 373)

Jesus uses the language of eating and drinking him in John 6. Jesus' teaching in John 6 about eating and drinking him was given before the Lord's Supper was instituted, but it helps us to understand what is going on in the eating and drinking at the Lord's Supper. In John 6:54-55, Jesus says, "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." This is shocking language. It was shocking to those who first heard it. Many of those who first heard these words of Jesus said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" Jesus knew it would be shocking and yet he uses it anyway. Obviously he had a good reason for speaking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

We must get past the thought of literally eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood and understand that he is speaking about spiritual food and drink that is eaten and drunk spiritually by faith. The Belgic Confession, in its article on the Lord's Supper says that faith is "the hand and mouth of our soul." It also says in the same article that believer eat Jesus "when they appropriate and receive Him by faith in the spirit."

So the idea is that our souls are fed and nourished when we by faith receive Jesus as the one whose body was broken for us and whose blood was shed for us. The picture is helpful. Just as our bodies require food and drink to nourish our physical life, so our souls require spiritual food and drink to nourish and strengthen our spiritual lives. And the spiritual food that nourishes our spiritual lives is the truth that Jesus gave his life and shed his blood for us on the cross and that he really and truly offers himself to us in the gospel and in the Lord's Supper. When we receive him by faith our faith is strengthened and our souls are nourished.

What actually happens is that we have greater confidence that Jesus really and truly is our saviour. We are more and more certain that Jesus loved us and gave himself for us. And that in turn strengthens our love for him and our desire to please him in our lives. The Christian life is about growing and growing means greater confidence that God has accepted us because Jesus died for us and it means greater love and greater zeal and greater obedience. And that kind of growth is nourished by feeding on the crucified Christ by faith. The truth that most nourishes our spiritual life is the truth that Jesus really and truly gives himself to us. That confidence that Jesus gives himself to us as our saviour is at the heart of spiritual growth.

So in the eating and drinking during the Lord's Supper we need to be eating and drinking spiritually as we eat and drink physically. It needs to be an act of internally receiving Jesus' offer of himself as the one who gave himself for us so that by receiving him we also receive the forgiveness of our sins and eternal life. The symbols and actions and words give us a way to picture spiritual realities and to make them more real to us.

There is another related way to think of this. When we eat Christ's body and drink his blood by faith we participate Christ and all his benefits. That is how Paul expresses it in 1 Corinthians 10:16, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" This is just another way of understanding the significance of eating and drinking the crucified Christ by faith. We participate in Christ and the salvation that is in him.

And since we do that together with other people of God, the idea of our unity in Christ is an important part of the meaning of the Lord's Supper. In 1 Corinthians 10:17 Paul continues, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." Paul there is spelling out what is inherent in Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper with his disciples. There were 11 of them at this point and they all drank of the same wine and ate of the same bread. They did not participate in Christ as isolated individuals, but as individuals who were part of a body of believers. That is why the Lord's Supper is also a celebration of our unity in Christ. We all feed on the same Christ. We all need the same salvation. And by being united to Christ we are also united to one another.

So we have looked at how in the Lord's Supper Jesus assures us that he really and truly gives himself to us. We have looked at how eating and drinking are pictures of faith – of receiving Christ. And we have looked at how by receiving Christ together the unity that we have in Christ is celebrated.

Next we will look at the fact that Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper during the Passover celebration. This points us to the fact that the Lord's Supper replaces the Passover. The OT people of God celebrated the Passover. Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in its place. There are both similarities and differences between the Passover and the Lord's Supper and looking at those similarities and differences helps us to understand the significance of the Lord's Supper.

The Passover meal was a memorial of the Exodus. God delivered his people from the slavery in Egypt. That is known as the Exodus and the Exodus was the great act of salvation that the OT people of God looked back to. The people of Israel, after the Exodus, always thought of themselves as the people whom God had delivered from Egypt and God instituted the Passover feast as a memorial of that deliverance. Exodus 12:14 "This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations, as a statute forever, you shall keep it as a feast."

The Passover was a memorial of the Exodus. As a memorial it helped the people remember that God had delivered them from Egypt. As a memorial it regularly impressed upon the people the great significance of that event. But there was an even deeper significance to the Passover celebration as a memorial. When later generations of Israelites who were not yet born at the time of the Exodus, celebrated the Passover, they were to see themselves as having participated in that event. In Deuteronomy 15:15 Moses was speaking to people who had not been born yet when God delivered his people from Egypt and he says to them. "You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD your God redeemed you." There is a quote from an ancient Jewish Passover liturgy that says, "Each man is obligated to see himself as if he came out of Egypt."

So the remembering associated with the Passover was not simply a recollection of a past historical event. The ancient Israelites were to see themselves as participating in that event. Because the past event had such profound implications for them in their present, God instructed them in the Passover to see themselves as actually participating in the original Exodus.

This idea applies to the Lord's Supper as well. It is a memorial of Jesus' death. And the biblical idea of memorial is more than a simple remembering. We are to see ourselves as participating in the salvation that the Jesus accomplished by his death. Just as the ancient Israelites of later generations were to see themselves as having participated in the Exodus so we in the Lord's Supper are to see ourselves as having been redeemed from the curse and slavery of sin as we participate in the Lord's Supper.

This is significantly different than simply recalling and meditating upon Jesus' death and resurrection. The remembering of the Lord's Supper is much more profound than bringing to mind something that happened long ago. We see ourselves as participating in Jesus' death and resurrection. We are there. We are involved. As one author has put it in connection with Israel's celebration of the Passover, "[T]hey inserted themselves into the public history of YHWH's saving action on behalf of his people." By telling us to eat and drink in remembrance of him, Jesus is telling us to insert ourselves into his saving action on behalf of his people.

Finally let us look at what Jesus says in connection with the cup that he gave to his disciples. "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." The wine in the cup represents Jesus' blood which was "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." But Jesus here speaks of it as his blood of the covenant.

The term “covenant” referred to the formal relationship between God and his people. The most helpful analogy is the marriage relationship which is a formal legal relationship which is intended to support the relationship between a husband and a wife. God established a covenant relationship with his people which was intended to function in a way that is similar to the marriage relationship. However, since God is holy and his people are sinners, the covenant relationship between God and his people required that atonement be made for the sins of the people. In OT times that atonement was made by animal sacrifices. The blood of sacrifices had to be shed in order for God to be in covenant with his people.

This is the background for understanding Jesus when he speaks about the blood of the covenant. Only Jesus is speaking about a new covenant rooted in the shedding of his blood. The new covenant is a much richer covenant because it is based on Jesus sacrifice for our sins.

The book of Hebrews teaches that the new covenant is a better covenant “since it is enacted on better promises.” (Hebrews 8:6) These better promises are as follows: to write his law on the hearts of his people, to be their God and they will be his people, to enable his people all to know him and to remember their sins no more. It is that covenant that Jesus is speaking of when he says in the Lord’s Supper “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

So God promises to write his laws on our hearts. That is another way of saying that he gives us new hearts to enable us to obey his law. The strength to obey God’s law is one of the blessings of the new covenant. And so is the knowledge of God. To know God is a great blessing – it is a relationship with God – it is having our eyes opened to see and enjoy the glory of God. And then there is the forgiveness of sins. God promises “For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

That is what Jesus is speaking about when he says that the wine of the Lord’s Supper is a symbol of “my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” What stands between us and all the blessings of the new covenant is our sins and the blood that Jesus shed for us on the cross is what removes our sins so that we receive everything that God promises to us in the new covenant.

And so we are in a covenant relationship with God that is made possible by Jesus pouring out his blood for the forgiveness of our sins. The covenant relationship is a secure relationship like the marriage relationship is supposed to be. The covenant relationship between God and his people is much more permanent than an earthly marriage relationship. When couples get married it is intended to be for a lifetime – till death do us part. The new covenant relationship is forever. There is no “till death do us part.” The new covenant is a forever covenant. Hebrews 13:20 speaks of the “blood of the eternal covenant.”

That is what Jesus is speaking about when he hands us the cup in the Lord’s Supper and says, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” This is what we receive when we receive the broken bread and the poured out wine by faith.

And this meal with Jesus is a foretaste of the great banquet that Jesus will celebrate with his people in eternity. Verse 29, "I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom. Jesus points us to the heavenly banquet that Jesus will enjoy with us in his Father's kingdom. The Lord's Supper is a memorial of what Jesus has done for us in the past. It is a participation in the present of the blessings of salvation. And it points us to the future when we will enjoy feasting with Jesus in the consummated kingdom of God.

And it is all rooted in the sacrifice that Jesus made for us when he gave his life on the cross. At the Lord's Supper Jesus impresses upon us that as we eat the bread and drink the wine by faith so surely does he give himself and all what he has obtained for us by his death. He does that to encourage us. He does it to strengthen our faith. He does that to nourish our hope. Let us now think of these things as we celebrate the Lord's Supper together.