



BETHANY

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Communion in Our Homes During Online Worship, April 2020

Bethany Presbyterian Church will be celebrating the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper on three occasions during Holy Week:

- April 5, Palm Sunday, 10:00 am
- April 9, Maundy Thursday, 6:30 pm (30-minute service)
- April 12, Easter, 10:00 am

Are we back in the Sanctuary? No. We will celebrate communion together at the same time, but in our separate homes. Two questions may emerge for you: *"How will the elements be provided?"* and *"Is this theologically appropriate?"*

How will the communion elements be provided?

Each individual or family will provide their elements for the sacrament: bread and juice or wine. Please respect the rules of sheltering at home and only purchase ingredients when you are already on your weekly grocery trip, get them from a local bakery doing carry out, or use food already in your home.

- **Bread:** any piece of bread will do: roll, loaf, tortilla or cracker. Maybe you want to bake bread.
- **Cup:** If you don't have grape juice or wine, any fruit from the earth is appropriate (In Jesus' day, people didn't drink water with meals, it was too contaminated. Usually, they had very watered-down wine.) Water is fine for the cup.

If you have only one of the elements, you may still receive the full benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. The grace and salvation of Christ's death and resurrection are fully present in *each* of the individual elements. Receiving the bread *is* receiving the sacrament, and same with the cup.

Preparation before worship: 15 minutes before worship, prepare the elements. Use a plate and a cup/chalice of your choice. Set them at the center of your worship space on a table of some kind, especially set apart for this sacred sacrament. This is separated space for this holy (set apart) purpose. Perhaps the Christ candle is set on the table.

Receiving the Sacrament: Danielle and I, as ordained Presbyterian pastors, will be the celebrants at this meal. Though the worship will be online, communion is being administered by ordained pastors. Like worship in our sanctuary, we will invite you to the table and pray the Prayer of Thanksgiving concluding with you joining us in the Lord's Prayer. We will then offer the Words of Institution for the bread and cup. Then we eat and drink at the same time together. We will close the sacrament in prayer.

"Must I receive the sacrament to participate in worship?" Of course not. Every time we feast in our sanctuary together, there are some of us who refrain from partaking of bread and cup for various reasons. You may feel led to simply pray or meditate on the benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection in a spirit of thanksgiving.

Is this theologically appropriate?

And now our second question, is this home communion appropriate theologically? In normal circumstances, no. In our Presbyterian, Reformed tradition, there are no "private" sacraments. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are always *corporate* celebrations when all the people of God are gathered together in one place. They are also public celebrations; there are no secret sacraments. The sacraments are corporate. The exceptions are for the home bound or those near death. And even those exceptional celebrations are connected to the corporate sacrament of the church together in one place.

However, these are not normal times. Today, we cannot be in the same place as we love our neighbor. We cannot share the same physical loaf or cup as we love each other as Christ loves us. However, we can be in the same time, in the same worship service, *and* participate in the same sacred meal across spaces.

Honestly folks, as a stickler myself on all things decently and in order concerning the Lord's Table, I have struggled with this concept of the sacrament in our homes. Our denomination has debated with this idea and rightly so. On March 24, the Office of the General Assembly offered an Advisory Opinion that permits this new practice under the guidance of the local church Session. If you want to see the inner workings of Presbyterian polity and theology in real time [please read click here to the full statement](#). There is some fresh theological thinking in this document, plus excellent material on our theology of the Lord's Supper.

I was so proud of our elders in our special Session meeting this week. They did real theological work in their pressing questions on the appropriateness of this practice. There is no script for us here. In the end, we agreed with the advisory opinion's permission to celebrate the sacrament during an online worship service.

Our Theology of Communion: *The elements for both our sacraments are simply common, everyday elements: water for Baptism, and bread and juice (or wine) for communion. What makes the elements holy is not where they come from or how they are prepared physically, but*

the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on them in the gathering of the people of God. In the Prayer of Thanksgiving there is always a moment when the pastor/celebrant calls down or invokes the Holy Spirit. We even have a technical term for this moment: epiclesis, which in Greek means "calling down from on high."

This "calling down" of the Holy Spirit is worded different ways but often like this: "Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood." Or it may be worded something like this: "Send down your Holy Spirit that these gifts of bread and wine may be for us the body and blood of Christ. Unite us with him forever and bring us with the whole creation to your eternal kingdom." It is the work of the Holy Spirit that makes the meal holy and special.

In the reformed tradition, we talk about the common elements becoming "signs." They remain water or bread, but they are more than mere symbols. They are signs that point to something, but they do more than that. I had a professor that used to say, "The element (bread, water, wine) is a sign that participates in the reality to which it points." And what is that reality? The reality is that we are receiving the spiritual presence of Christ, the mercies and benefits of his death and resurrection. We taste his grace, mercy and love. Something is happening whether we sense it or not.

When Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me," he invites us to not simply recall his death to mind, but to *re-member* him in that moment of eating and drinking. We receive him spiritually. The Westminster Confession says it like this: "There is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified." I like to say at the 6th grade communion milestone: "There's a physical sign but a spiritual reality."

If you would like to explore more of our Presbyterian theology of the Lord's Supper and the sacraments, I invite you to see the denominational link above. There are some excellent theological statements from our Directory for Worship referred to at the end of that document.

Peace in Christ,

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