

Christ Community Covenant Church
Eucharist: With Thanksgiving
Pastor Randy McNeal – January 20, 2013

“For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”
1 Corinthians 11:26

Events and Experiences

This past weekend was our annual middle school winter retreat that we affectionately call “Faceplant”. We head to one of Young Life’s camp called “Frontier Ranch” in Buena Vista and meet up with 12 other churches and close to 350 other people. We hire a great band to help lead worship, a great speaker to provide relevant worship, we plan huge games that involve all sorts of running, eating, and getting a little messy, and then we also utilize the pool, hot tub, game room, basketball courts, and all the other great things Young Life has to offer. If you’ve never been to a Young Life camp then you are definitely missing out. They are the most well put together, well run, well equipped camps you will ever see. They exist for the sole purpose of reaching kids for Christ and deepening their relationship with him.

We came back feeling great and with memories of the weekend we will not soon forget. Sure it was fun. But perhaps more importantly we were all able to evaluate our identity and ask questions about where it is rooted. Is it rooted in Christ? Or more in what my friends think? How does my family play into it? Who am I when I am alone? Who am I with God? These types of weekend retreats are one of the greatest things a youth ministry can offer. We put a lot of time, energy, and money into them because these events shape our youth’s faith and connect them with God in a real, highly emotional at times, way. The same will be true for Powderburn coming up the end of February with our High School age youth and can be said for our time at CHIC, YouthFront, Mission Trips, Fall Retreats, and so on. Getting kids away from their world and encountering God is one of the most important things we do.

Consumer driven Worship: “I”

I have only officially attended 3 different churches in my life. The one I grew up in for 18 years, the one I worked in previously for 7 years and now here the past 3. When I travel I love to experience different churches and how they do this whole worshiping God thing. I’ve run the entire spectrum from highly liturgical catholic services, one led by the Pope in Rome and all the way through a highly charismatic service. With these experiences I’ve developed my preference in worship.

I love highly structured, contemplative, liturgical services with moments of silence. The worship that moves me most is when we do things like saying the Apostles’ Creed or Lord’s Prayer together. I get choked up every time. There is something to the deep history of believers and the participation of the body that helps me feel good about worship.

Still, in other churches I’ve experienced poor worship. Where it feels like I am watching a concert or some sort of act. The people up front seem fake. And especially when the music is poor or not my style I can get pretty frustrated. I want something I can participate in. I want something quieter that makes me think. I want something that touches my emotions.....And then I wonder who the subject of my worship is when I think this way?

It’s “I”. I want it my way. In those moments I’m not focusing on God but merely my own emotions and my own desires.

“When our desire for worship changes depending on style and preference the focus of our worship becomes about us and our own experience.”

I think we Christians are often in danger of selfishness in our worship where we care more about our experience in worship more than who we are worshiping. Every time the youth come back from a great event we are on a type of spiritual high. We are excited, full of joy and in love with singing songs. Those emotions eventually end and we go back to feeling the same way we did before we left. Often times the youth feel unsatisfied.

“If our faith is not rooted in events but only in our experiences, our emotions, we will always be left unsatisfied.”

We will chase emotional experiences, and high not unlike that of an addict needing the next fix to just get through rather than resting on the events that have marked our faith. We try to prep the youth for this type of “let down” in a way. The fact is those emotions were real and important. They are rooted in an event be it Faceplant, Powderburn, CHIC, etc... and that event will always be a reminder of a time when they encountered God in a real way regardless of whether they feel like it.

Mother Theresa later in life commented that she spent years without feeling God. In fact many other heroes of our faith faced similar crisis. So much so that some began to ponder the fact that maybe the lack of feeling God combined with the knowledge and faith that God is indeed present, is more a sign of mature faith.

Perhaps this needs to be our attitude in worship. We must root our worship in the events of Christ and God’s revelation through the Bible so that we can be sure to avoid selfishness and the tendency to chase emotions. When we experience emotions we ought to consider them as a true gift from God. And when we don’t, our worship should not cease or be limited.

The Church in Corinth struggled with selfishness as well.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

¹⁷ In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸ In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval. ²⁰ So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, ²¹ for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. ²² Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. ³² Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. ³⁴ Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

In talking about Communion today I want us to end up seeing it for what it truly is. Communion is the celebration of an event that has both already happened and an event that is to come. Communion roots our faith in an event in our history and reminds us of what Christ has done in our life and what Christ will continue to do until completion.

Reformation

If we are to root our faith in events then we need to look back through our history as a church, the whole body of Christ, and see how this celebration has morphed over the thousands of years. When we talk about Church History it's easy to cast judgment on all those people who got it wrong. When I was reading about the crusades and abuses of the Catholic Church one professor remarked that a student had raised their hand and asked "But where were the Protestants? Surely they would not have stood for this." The fact is that during the time of the crusades and extreme abuses of the Catholic Church the protestant reformation had yet to start. That means the church; the body of Christ, our heritage comes from a dark past. There was no Catholic and Protestant for close to 16 centuries. It was the Holy Catholic, universal, church. When we look back on Church History we need to see it for what it is. It is our history. Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and the rest that sprung up all come from the same original church. So when I refer to the Catholic Church I am not referring to it as we know it today but as a long lost relative that produced many great practices, theology, and people to help show us how to live our faith.

One of these long lost brothers is becoming a good friend of mine. I read a lot of his stuff and I am intrigued by his actions which were both great and at times downright crazy.

This is Martin Luther (slide). The great Reformer who finally stood up to the abuses of the church at the time and helped correct our wrong theology. His intent was never to split from the Catholic Church and start the Protestant one. He was a Catholic monk and greatly valued unity amongst the body. Still, it happened that he and his followers eventually got kicked out of the church and started their own of which we now find ourselves in a distant branch off the original protestant church.

This is a picture (slide) I took when I was visiting Wittenburg, Germany where Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses, the things that needed to be corrected within the church. They mostly dealt with issues of Salvation and whether or not the church could control this. One of the ways the Church would control salvation is by communicating that communion was a saving grace and if you didn't take it regularly you would be in danger of hell. So they would withhold communion from you if you were caught up in some un-repentant sin or even if they needed money. They used this sacrament to get what they wanted from people and built some amazing churches because of it. Martin Luther would have none of that.

This is your typical church in Europe (slide). It's stone and echoes. If you've never heard a pipe organ or a Gregorian chant in a church like this then you are missing out. It's profound. There were no microphones back in church history and so you can imagine that at times it would be hard to hear. I wonder how many misunderstandings in our theology came from people not being able to hear. One that I know of directly relates to this topic of communion.

"Hock es Corpus Meum"

Imagine being in this church week after week. There are no nurseries so the babies probable just cry. There are no Sunday school classes so maybe you also have to keep your kids quiet. It's probably not that easy to hear the priest when he lifts the body and blood of Christ and says:

"Hock es Corpus Meum" and at this point in the service it is believed that the symbolic bread and wine are transformed into the literal body and blood of Christ. This phrase was adapted over the years to one you are very much aware of. ***"Hocus Pocus"***

It was believed that by some magical act, the priest waved over the elements and said "Hocus Pocus" and the elements were transformed! This was one of the things corrected throughout the reformation. We don't hold to the belief that the elements are literal body and blood of Christ. We believe they are symbolic elements of a real grace that has happened in our lives.

Greek "Eucaristo" to give thanks

The Greek, and I'm pretty sure this is right because I googled it, word for communion was Eucaristo or what we know as the Eucharist. A literal translation today is to give thanks. So the very root of this event was one of thankfulness. We come to the table to give thanks for what God has done.

The Table:

Symbols are important to tradition; they root us in our past and in our family. For those who have been married or those who have ever spent holidays with people other than family, consider the first time you experienced a holiday apart from your family. What happens when you are trying to plan the menu? It's a huge ordeal. One wants the stuffing in the turkey the other cooks it separately. One does a late dinner after a brunch the other eats earlier so there is time for second dinner. Is Christmas on Christmas Eve or Day? When do you open gifts? If you live away from family whose do you visit? One doesn't mind that there are no green beans even though you can't really have a holiday without them. I mean it's not that hard, just open a can, add some onions and bacon, boil for a bit and you got green beans. How can you not have green beans?

These may or may not have been discussions in our house this year....

The Reformation:

"The reformation is one of the best things that happened to Christianity. The reformation is one of the worst things to happen in Christianity."

Gave us freedom from oppressive religion. It caused division.

Gave us the Bible in our own language. Allows for anybody to interpret it however they want.

It had more emphasis on preaching, the pulpit. It replaced the original focal point of our worship: The Table. That's why today I am not preaching from a pulpit but from a table. Much in the way of an old, crazy grandpa, I want to tell you the story of Communion and center our time in worship on the event of this meal.

Luther vs Zwingly

The big debate in the time of the reformation over Communion happened between Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingly and our friend Martin Luther.

Zwingly interpreted the scripture to say: "This my body" and so Christ was referring to the elements as a Symbol Only.

Luther took more of the literal view claiming the scriptures to say "This *is* My Body" the Literal Body, "Hock es Corpus Meum".

There is a legend that Zwingly and Luther had a debate about communion and this was the one issue they could not resolve. It's told that as Zwingly is outlining his argument Luther is scratching something into the table: the word "is". After a while Luther begins to circle the word and pound on the table repeating over and over "Hock es Corpus Meum" louder and louder until the two part ways and another church split has happened. It's amazing how much of church history has split over one little word. It's amazing how many churches split today over minor issues.

What we believe about communion is somewhere between the two extremes. It is an "Outward sign of an inward reality". The event was real and what it does for us in grace is real. The elements are symbols of this reality. We often use this way to describe a Sacrament.

It comes from the word

"Sacramentum" which is to take an oath to swear allegiance:

In the times of Jesus there was a saying: "Caesar is Lord". Everyone would be required, if asked to say this signifying their allegiance to Caesar. The Early Christians adapted this and we see in the New Testament the popular saying "Jesus is Lord". This was in direct rebellion to Caesar. The Christians would only take a Sacramentum or allegiance to Jesus. It was like the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and their refusal to eat at the king's table. Eating at the king's table signified swearing allegiance to that King and they would only swear allegiance to YHWH.

The sacrament of Communion for us is a symbol of us coming to King Jesus' table and swearing allegiance to him and him alone. In doing so we participate in a meal of thanksgiving for what Christ has done for us.

1 corinthians 10:16 Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?

So as we take communion, we try and remember this event and allow it to be the center of our worship rather than our emotions. There are four things I think we can remember when we come to the table.

The Apostle Paul advises us:

1 Corinthians 11:27-32

²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. ³² Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

The body must be broken

We are humbled because we cannot do it, it has been done for us in history. Paul admonishes us to examine ourselves.

³¹ But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment.

And so we take a good look inside of ourselves and ask if there is any sinful way among us. The Corinthians struggled with selfishness and I truly believe that selfishness is the root of our sins. So we ask:

Is there any sinful way in me? Whose table have I been eating from; am I serving Christ or the world? Am I willing to be humble enough to eat from this table? Am I able to let my own body be broken so that I may participate in the sufferings of Christ?

As we examine ourselves to eat the bread we may find God nudging us to new commitments or to give up the errors in our ways. By partaking of this meal you are both celebrating and committing your allegiance to Christ.

The Cup is not always easy

Maybe you remember Jesus' prayer in the garden that if there was any way this cup could be passed that it would be. He sweat blood in the agony over the task at hand. Sometimes we experience a similar angst.

Like the Corinthians we may be suffering from disunity. We may reflect and realize that we are holding something against someone else. And so we confess that sin to God and that grace is upon us. But by drinking the cup you are also making a commitment to follow through with seeking forgiveness or extending grace.

We are told "Do not drink in a manner unworthy". In the past I would have thought this meant that if I had sin I struggled with then I shouldn't partake of communion. Now I believe that when that sin is revealed, by taking communion I am committing to repentance no matter what that may entail.

Communion Roots us in the Death and Resurrection of Christ

We started out talking about events and experiences and how at times our emotions are what we chase. There are times where our worship becomes more about us and our preferences than God.

“If our faith is not rooted in events but only in our experiences, our emotions, we will always be left unsatisfied.”

If we want to make sure that our selfish nature does not interfere with our worship then the best thing we can do is not chase emotional experiences but root ourselves in the death and resurrection of Christ. It's important not to misunderstand me. The way you prefer to worship is important because it's part of how you connect with God. We all connect with God in different ways and so don't be too quick to throw out your preferences and emotional response to God. They are still valid and important. The danger is in allowing those preferences to take priority over the events of Christ and the unity of the church. Too many people leave churches in search of “their style” of worship and I think that many times it's more a sign of the disunity of the body.

Communion celebrates the second coming of Christ

This truth is where we find ourselves much of the time; celebrating the second coming of Christ. This will be the second most significant time in our history as Christians.

“Communion is a meal within the now and not yet kingdom.”

When we take communion we take a look into our past but also are prompted to look towards our future. As we commit to serve our Lord Jesus Christ at this table we do so out in the world. It doesn't stop here. As Pastor Mike is fond of saying “the mission field is right outside those doors”. Communion doesn't stop here but must continue out there.

“For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”
1 Corinthians 11:26

Benediction

Have you ever read a great mystery novel? When I was young I used to read the Hardy Boys and then in high school John Grisham novels. There is one great thing about every good work of fiction. The climax. The point in the story where things are made clear. Clues are put together, questions are answered and new questions form. It's the most exciting part of the book and then....we find answers to all our questions and the story ends very shortly afterward because once we have the answers we aren't interested in reading any more.

The same is true of what we are talking about these past weeks and the weeks to come. We are asking “why” church. We will do our best to answer as much as we can but always, there will be mystery. And that's a great thing. We get to live in the most exciting part of the story. We never have to put the book down because there are always new clues, new questions. We live in the climax of our story of getting to know God. We live in the best mystery ever written.

So as you go, enjoy searching for clues and asking more questions. Go and enjoy the read.

Amen