**Preaching Notes for the Third Sunday of Easter, Year C (April 10, 2016)**

**By Rev. Dr. Dawn Chesser**

**[John 21:1-19](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=135" \l "gospel_reading)**

Whenever a text comes up in the lectionary that offers an opportunity for us to educate our members about the meaning of Holy Communion in the United Methodist Church, I think we should take it. Most of the time people think that the only texts in the Bible that deal with Holy Communion are the passages about the Last Supper (Matthew 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–23) and Paul’s institution narrative in his letter to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 11:23–26). But the Scriptures bear witness to other stories that illuminate the importance of gathering around the table for Christians, for it is around the table that our eyes are opened to the presence of the Lord.

These other less direct stories can help us to grow a deeper understanding of our holy meal. Some passages to consider are the feeding of the multitudes (Matthew 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44 and 8:1–10; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–14 and 25–59); the encounter on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35); the account of table practice in the early church (Acts 2:42–47); and the story for today, in which Jesus appears to the disciples on the shore, prepares a meal for them, and they recognize him.

John says that this incident by the sea of Tiberius is one of the ways Jesus “showed himself again” to the disciples. How did he show himself? He appeared on the beach, but he must have not looked like himself because John tells us the disciples didn’t recognize him. Even after a conversation, they didn’t seem to realize it was Jesus. It was only after the miraculous catch of fish that the disciple whom Jesus loved recognized him, and then reported to Peter that it was, in fact, Jesus who was standing on the shoreline. Once everyone got to the shore, the rest of the disciples approached this man who was grilling fish and bread over a charcoal fire, and John says that it was only after “Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them” (verse 13, NRSV) that his identity became clear.

When I first started attending the North American Academy of Liturgy, I was a PhD student in liturgical studies, and I noticed that a lot of the other people in my field were “foodies” like me. That is, these liturgical scholars were interested in cooking and taking a long and leisurely time with dining.

I have been interested in cooking my entire life. I grew up in a family of fine cooks, and I got my first job in a restaurant at age thirteen. I started out bussing tables, but in no time at all I had talked my way into working as a prep cook in the kitchen. I loved working in kitchens; and for the next eight years, through middle school and high school and college, I worked part-time in restaurant kitchens. Since all the restaurants I worked in made everything from scratch, I learned a great deal about the art of cooking. The work was hard, but very satisfying. I learned how to properly use a knife, all about flavor profiles, and many different cooking techniques over those years. These skills have served me well as a mother, wife, and pastor.

Throughout my career in the local church, I incorporated cooking into my ministry. I cooked delicious homemade casseroles, desserts, and breads for potlucks. I cooked breakfast for entire congregations. I cooked elaborate meals for Wednesday night fellowships. I invited parishioners and friends and family and my children’s friends over to dine around my table. I hosted Christmas Eve parties with huge spreads of food in my parsonages.

For most of the years that I invited parishioners to be with me around table, I didn’t make a clear connection between what I was doing and the holy meal over which I presided the first Sunday of every month in worship. I simply fed people because it was natural to me, and it was something I really enjoyed. But after I returned to school and began to study the origins of the Eucharist more deeply, I began to realize that gathering around the Table of the Lord was about much more than I had previously understood.

Like many people, when I was growing up in the United Methodist Church, I didn’t realize that the words that were said before we ate the little wafers of bread and drank the grape juice from the tiny glass cups was a blessing of the meal we were about to receive. I always felt a little bit guilty, and I primarily thought about my sins and Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for them when I approached the Communion rail to partake. I didn’t make the connection between the Table of the Lord and the tables around which the church family gathered to share in a potluck meal, or the table around which my family gathered for dinner. I really didn’t even know that the table where the bread and the wine were placed was actually a *table.* I thought it was an altar.

But when I began to read about how the Prayer of Great Thanksgiving developed in early Christianity, I was astonished to learn that the words that were offered over the bread and wine by the earliest Christians were based on the prayers of thanks and blessing that Jewish families offered at their family tables before sharing in meals, especially on special feast days.

At these meals, the head of the family, or the leader of the community, would offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God: “Blessed are you, Lord God, king of the world, who has brought bread from heaven.” The bread would then be broken and passed around the table. Other special foods would also often be shared, each one with special prayers to go along with it. Toward the end of the meal, the leader would take a cup of wine and pray another blessing, this time in three parts: (1) Praising God for all creation; (2) Giving thanks for the covenant, the law, and the entire history of salvation; and (3) Offering petitions that God’s creative and redemptive actions would be continued, especially in the coming of the Messiah.

When Jesus gathered with his disciples around the table, perhaps for a Passover meal, on the night before his death, he shaped the prayer for the feast after the prayers he knew from his Jewish heritage. Only in this instance, he added some words that gave the meal a whole new meaning: “This is my body. This is my blood. Do this in remembrance of me.”

And so when the disciples gathered after Jesus had ascended to be with the Father, they did as he commanded. They gathered around a table to remember him, to tell the stories of all that he had done, and to share the things he had taught them. And they would give thanks to God and bless the food in the pattern of the ancient prayer. Over time, the traditional Jewish prayers were altered to reflect a new meaning, and eventually the ritual practice of eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of Jesus moved out of people’s homes and into sanctuaries, where it became permanently separated from its origins at the dinner table.

It is when we are gathered around the table that our eyes are opened and we are enabled to recognize that Christ is present with us in a special and unique way. This is why Holy Communion was so important to the early Christians. It is why Holy Communion was so important to John and Charles Wesley. And it is why Holy Communion is so important to United Methodists today.

For more information about Holy Communion in the United Methodist Church, or for further study with your congregation, see [***The Meaning of Holy Communion in The United Methodist Church***](http://bookstore.upperroom.org/Products/DR777/the-meaning-of-holy-communion-in-the-united-methodist-church.aspx) by E. Bryon Anderson.

**[Acts 9:1-6 (7-20)](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=135" \l "hebrew_reading)**

**Week 3: Fourth Sunday in Easter**

**Key Word: Grace**

**(Note: Please also see** [**Easter Series 2016: A Focus on Our Baptismal Vows and the Book of Acts**](http://gbod-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/legacy/kintera-files/worship-lectionary-planning-helps-c/Study-Guide_EasterSeries-on-Acts-YearC2016.pdf)**)**

What is the difference between being a follower of Jesus as a United Methodist and being a follower of Jesus from another denominational perspective? What is distinctive about being United Methodist?

Since this week’s text is about Paul’s dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, I would like to consider the question of United Methodism from the perspective of conversion -- especially since our baptismal vow for this week is the following:

“Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?”

What does it mean to convert to the Christian faith? It it a matter of saying certain words? Is it a once-and-for-all moment, or is there more to it than simply confessing Jesus Christ as your Savior?

*Below I will share a personal story of how I have understood conversion for United Methodists being different from what some other denominational groups think of as conversion****. This is my own experience*** *and may not be representative at all of the experiences of other United Methodists. I share this story to encourage you to think about experiences you have had in your own life that point to some to of these differences, and to tell your own story. The purpose here is not to draw lines of right and wrong understanding, but to expand all of our understandings of what conversion entails for disciples of Jesus Christ. In your sermon preparation, this would be a great topic to discuss with some of the members of your own congregation as well. Note that there may be great differences in understanding. The point is not to judge one understanding as more valid than another, but to make clear how United Methodists understand conversion as it relates to Christian discipleship. Here are a few questions to guide your discussion:*

* What does it mean to you to “confess Jesus Christ as your Savior”? When did that happen? What happened in your life that brought you to a point of conversion?
* How is your life different now from the way it was before you met Jesus personally?
* How are you putting your trust in the grace shown in Jesus Christ? Give specific examples (Hint: think about the means of grace!)
* What are you doing to serve Jesus? Again, be specific.

When I was a young person growing up in Arkansas, I was always a little envious of the kids in other youth groups, especially when it came to the mission trips they took. For my Southern Baptist, Church of Christ, and other non-Methodist Christian friends, it seemed like the purpose of their mission trips was very different from the Methodist mission trips that I knew about. While the Methodists went on mission work trips, where we would paint houses or help with Vacation Bible school in a rural community, my non-Methodist friends would go to places like New Orleans or Chicago or Kansas City or even New York City. When I asked my friends what they did on their mission trips in these exotic (at least in my mind) locales, they would look at me strangely and explain that they did what people do on mission trips: they witnessed on street corners in order to win people to Christ. They would be trained in how to witness, and then they went to places largely inhabited by people who had yet to be saved and tried to save people, using tracts or other techniques to aid complete strangers in the process of making a verbal confession for Christ.

For these Christian friends, conversion was about saying certain words aloud in the presence of a witness. Once those words were properly spoken, a person was saved forever. The goal of evangelism was to elicit these confessions of faith from nonbelievers or backsliders. I imagined that the success or failure of one’s mission trip was determined by the number of souls a person saved for Christ.

When I read the story of Paul’s encounter with the living Lord on the road to Damascus and his sudden and complete conversion to living the rest of his life as a disciple of Christ, or when I read other stories from the Book of Acts where, upon hearing the good news of Jesus Christ, hundreds or even thousands of people suddenly became Christ followers, I imagine that my childhood friends were not wrong in their desire to witness about Jesus and help others to come to know him as their personal savior.

But United Methodists don’t stop there when it comes to understanding what Christian conversion is about. Our stated goal as United Methodists is not simply to make disciples of Jesus Christ; it is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. This language suggests that making a confession for Christ is only the first step in a lifelong process of living into full discipleship.

Certainly knowing God’s saving love in Jesus Christ is a critical part of discipleship.

I think the answer for United Methodists is found within this vow. Because our vow does not stop at confessing Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

One of the simplest and most helpful summaries of the United Methodist view that I have had the pleasure to read is actually a book written for youth by F. Belton Joyner, Jr., [*Being United Methodist in the Bible Belt: A Theological Survival Guide for Youth, Parents, and Other Confused United Methodists*](https://www.cokesbury.com/product/9780664231682/being-united-methodist-in-the-bible-belt)(Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

Joyner notes that John Wesley wrote, “Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third is religion itself” (Rupert E. Davies, ed., *The Works of John Wesley,* vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989, 227).

That is to say, in the words of Joyner,

Salvation is like a house. To get into the house, you have to first get on the porch (repentance) and then you have to go through the door (faith). But the house itself—one’s relationship with God—is holiness, holy living (Joyner, 3).

Noting that while United Methodists do not dismiss the importance of repentance and asking for pardon, the critical component for us is holy living. Furthermore, all three of these components—repentance, faith, and holiness—are not something we can earn by saying certain words or doing certain things. They are, for United Methodists, gifts of God’s grace.

So how do we engage in holy living as United Methodists? By following the General Rules and practicing the [means of grace](http://www.umc.org/how-we-serve/the-wesleyan-means-of-grace).

**The General Rules**

The General rules developed early in our history, first appearing in 1739. The rules were set for small groups (called classes, bands, or societies) of Methodists who met regularly for mutual accountability, to work out their own salvation, and to flee from the wrath of God. The rules provided ways of giving evidence of a person’s desire for salvation. The three basic rules were:

1. Do no harm
2. Do good
3. Attend the ordinances of God.

**The Ordinances of God (Means of Grace)**

The ordinary means of grace are the ways God has provided as a vehicle for grace. Wesley described them as “outward signs, words, or actions ordained by God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary channels whereby God might convey to humankind preventing, justifying, and sanctifying grace” (Albert Outler, ed., *The works of John Wesley,* vol.1, 381). Wesley divided these ordinary means into two categories: Works of piety and works of mercy. Works of piety include the public worship of God, the ministry of the Word (either read or expounded), sharing in Holy Communion, family and private prayer, searching the Scriptures, and fasting or abstinence. Works of mercy are the things that we do as we practice holy living. This is specifically about “spreading scriptural holiness over the land” (Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., [*The Methodist Experience in America: A Sourcebook,*](https://www.cokesbury.com/product/9780687246731/the-methodist-experience-in-america-volume-ii/)vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000, 82). That is to say, we practice holy living by the way we love the world around us and all that is within it. The issues in Wesley’s day were not so different from the issues we face in our own time and place: slavery, poverty, liquor trafficking, prison reform, war, politics, and education for all.

As Joyner puts it,

United Methodists see a Jesus who heals, who teaches, who forgives, who restores, and who is just, and they seek to be advocates of those systems that heal, that teach, that give new beginnings, that bring justice. . . This work is nothing less than the redemption of the whole created order. The theological term for it is “entire sanctification,” which means the full love of God and the full love of neighbor. Persons in the Wesleyan family use “Christian perfection” as another way of speaking of entire sanctification. (Joyner, *Being United Methodist in the Bible Belt*)

So yes, as United Methodists, we desperately desire for people to be saved for Christ and to have a personal relationship with their Lord and Savior. But United Methodists believe that salvation is something that we do, something that we practice and get better at and live more fully into as we move through our lives. That is what we mean when we say in our vow that we promise to serve him as our Lord.

**[Revelation 5:11-14](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=135" \l "epistle_reading)**

What a vision John casts of God’s kingdom: It is a place where we hear the voices of many angels singing along with all living creatures—“myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,” every creature in heaven and on earth and even UNDER the earth and in the sea, all God’s children across this wide earth, from the righteous to the unrighteous, every tribe, every tongue, every nation, all singing together in one full voice: “Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to received power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

Sadly, there are not a lot of places where Sunday morning looks like this vision of all God’s creatures singing and worshiping together with one voice. More and more, it seems like our inclination is to retreat to our separate corners and, in the name of Jesus Christ, fight to maintain our own interests.

But what would it look like if we were to live out God’s vision here on earth, as it is in heaven? Would our planet be a place of radical inclusivity rather than a place where we mark territories and claim privileges? Would our churches be places where all are in our sanctuaries and at the Lord’s Table? Could Sunday morning no longer be the most segregated hour of the week? Is it possible to see Revelation not as a book of judgment, but as a call to welcome everyone to join in a song of praise, love, and grace?

Have you ever been to a church service or other event where the barriers came down? Think about a time in your life when you witnessed such a thing. What made it possible? What happened that brought people together? What did it feel like? Can you describe that experience in your own words? Can you talk about how it made you feel?

Now imagine that the congregation sitting before you is worshiping; and it feels like that, looks like that, inspires hope for the future like that. What would it take to move your church in that direction? Who from your community would need to be there to make that happen? What would you need to do to make sure that those from your community who are not there would be made to feel welcome in your sanctuary and at your table? What steps could you take to realize God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven in your community of faith?