

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, December 6, 2015**

UNTIL HE COMES AGAIN

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

In a small town somewhere in upstate New York, I'm told, there is an Anglican church known as "the church of the holy radiator." This church had had the same pastor for 35 years. He was much loved by the church and community alike. After he retired, a new pastor came – a much younger man who was fresh out of seminary, full of energy and eager to do well. It didn't take long, though, for him to begin to discern that something was wrong. The people were upset with him about something, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Eventually, he called one of the leaders of the church aside and said: "I don't know what it is, but I have a feeling there is something wrong."

"Well, pastor," came the reply, "I hate to say it, but it's the way you do the communion service."

"The way I do the communion service? What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not so much what you do as what you leave out."

"I don't think I leave anything out of the communion service."

"Oh yes, you do. You see, just before our previous pastor administered the cup to the congregation, he would always go over and touch the radiator. And then he would ..."

"Touch the radiator?! I never heard of a liturgical tradition like that."

So the young pastor decided to call his predecessor. He said: "I haven't been here even a month, and already I'm in trouble."

"Why? What's the problem?"

"I'm not sure. It has something to do with touching the radiator. Does that make sense? Did you do that?"

"Oh yes," said the retired pastor. "Always before I administered the cup to the people in the communion service, I would touch the radiator to discharge the static electricity, so I wouldn't shock anyone."

For 35 years, the people of that congregation had become so accustomed to it that it became part of their communion tradition. Which is why the church is now known as "the church of the holy radiator."

We have no “holy radiators” to touch here at Faith. But I do want to talk with you about communion for a few minutes this morning. Advent and communion actually go together in a significant way. They have something of major importance in common. Both have a kind of double vision. That is, both look back to something that took place in the past, to a pivotal event in history. And both look forward to something yet to come, to an event still in the future.

Advent, this season of preparation for the celebration of the birth of our Savior, is a time of looking back to the first coming or advent of the Lord Jesus Christ in “the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4). But it is also meant to be a time of focused thinking, anticipation, and preparation as we look forward to His second advent – His promised coming again – at God’s appointed time to bring all of history and God’s eternal plan of redemption to completion.

Communion has this same double vision or twin focus. It points us back, first of all, to the purpose of Christ’s first advent. It reminds us of the reason Jesus was born into this world, the reason “the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us” (John 1:14).

In communion, we look back and remember what Jesus did for us in His saving love. And we rejoice in the spiritual benefits of His sacrifice for us. But it is not all about the past, just as Advent is not only about the past. There is a future focus as well.

Paul says that when we celebrate communion, when we eat the bread and drink the cup, we “proclaim the Lord’s death” in all its saving power “until He comes again” (1 Cor. 11:26). Until, that is, His second advent. Whenever and as often as we do it, we do it with the recognition that the Savior, whose first coming to save us from our sins is what Christmas is all about, *will come again*. And that this sacrament, this holy meal we call “the Lord’s Supper,” is but a taste, or a foretaste, of what God has in store for us when we feast together in the fulfillment of His kingdom yet to come.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 92) says that a sacrament is “a holy regulation established by Christ, in which Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers by physical signs.” The physical signs in the sacrament of communion, of course, are the bread and the cup, which signify the body and blood of the Lord Jesus given for us. They are, in the words of Augustine, “visible signs of an invisible grace.”

There are three characteristics that communion and Advent have in common that I want you to take note of as we prepare to receive the sacrament today.

A COMMEMORATION

First, as I’ve already said, each of them is a commemoration of a past event. Advent commemorates the birth of Jesus at a particular place and time in history. Communion is a commemoration of Christ’s saving death on the cross for us. It is not a re-offering of Christ. Nor is it an additional offering or sacrifice, as if there was something lacking in the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross so that something more is needed.

No. Communion is a visual re-enactment, if you will, of the saving death of Jesus on our behalf, in the same way that Civil War buffs, for example, re-enact Civil War engagements. It is a re-enactment, not a repetition. Not a re-offering of Christ, as at least some Roman Catholics believe and teach. Once was enough.

As a commemoration, we observe communion in remembrance of the Lord Jesus, so that we will never forget what He did for us and the price He paid for our salvation.

It is like the place in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* where the hobbit Pippin is standing at the gate of the city when the powerful witch king comes through the gate. Just as the demon king is about to destroy the city, Pippin hears the horns of the riders of Rohan off in the distance. They have come to the rescue. Though it would cost the king of Rohan his life, the city is saved. Tolkien tells us that for the rest of his life, Pippin could never hear a horn off in the distance without bursting into tears, because every time he heard the sound of a horn, it reawakened the memory of his salvation and of the one who died for him.

So it is with communion, and with Advent as well, as we remember the coming of the Savior who was born to die for us.

A CELEBRATION

Second, it is not just a commemoration. It is also a celebration.

We remember 9-11, but we do not celebrate it. We remember the Holocaust, but we do not celebrate it. We remember the taking of hostages at the U. S. Embassy in Iran, but we do not celebrate it.

On the other hand, not only do we remember what happened in Congress on July 4, 1776, we celebrate it, too. Every year.

We do not just remember D-Day and the thousands of brave men who lost their lives in the Normandy invasion. We celebrate what they achieved as it led to the ultimate defeat of Hitler and the liberation of Europe from the oppression of Nazi occupation.

In Advent we celebrate God's invasion of this world in the incarnation. We celebrate His coming to us in humility, as a helpless baby, to do for us what we could not and cannot do for ourselves – to save us from our sins.

In the sacrament of communion, we do not simply remember something that took place a long time ago. We celebrate the fact that Jesus, the Christ of Christmas, the Child of Bethlehem, the sinless Son of God, bearing our sin, willingly went to the cross in order to set us free from our sin and to bring us into a right relationship with God. We celebrate the wonder of His grace – His undeserved favor – that the bread and the cup represent. And we celebrate the blessing of His spiritual presence with us as we commune with Him in humility and faith.

A CONSECRATION

It is a commemoration. It is a celebration. Third, it is an opportunity for consecration. An opportunity for each of us to consecrate or re-consecrate ourselves to our faithful Savior, who gave His all for us.

Like the season of Advent as a whole, the sacrament of communion provides us with the opportunity to offer ourselves back to God as living, breathing sacrifices, which, in view of the greatness of His mercies and grace to us, is really the only reasonable thing to do (Romans 12:1).

Communion is a call to renew your personal commitment to Christ. To deepen your devotion to Him. To proclaim His pre-eminence. To give yourself fully to the Father's business.

For how long? Until Christ returns. Until He comes again. Until His second advent. Until the day comes when there will be no more need to gather around this communion table, for then we will sit down together with the Lord Jesus Himself to feast forever in His kingdom.

Come, Lord Jesus. Yes, Lord, let it be so. Amen.