

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, September 4, 2011**

**THE LORD'S SUPPER:  
A PICTURE OF GRACE**

**Matthew 26:20, 26-30**

**INTRODUCTION TO SCRIPTURE READING**

As is the case today, it is our usual custom here at Faith to have the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of each month. Not always, but normally it is what we do on the first Sunday of the month as a way of carrying out the command of Jesus to "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24, 25).

I want you to look with me today at the account of the institution of the Lord's Supper by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Turn with me in your Bible to Matthew 26. The setting is the upper room of the house where Jesus and the twelve disciples shared the Passover feast – for Jesus, it was the last supper – on the night before His vicarious (substitutionary), sacrificial, atoning death on the cross for us.

Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's Word as we look together at Matthew 26:20, 26-30. Hear the Word of God.

**A PICTURE OF GRACE**

I like the way Augustine, a famous church leader and bishop in North Africa in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, described sacraments. A sacrament, he said, is "a visible sign of an invisible grace." It is a picture of grace – God's grace, amazing grace, redeeming grace, transforming grace – that comes free of charge to people who do not deserve it, and never will. Including you and me.

I want to talk with you today about the Sacrament of Holy Communion, which is known by a number of different names. Sometimes we call it *Communion*, which emphasizes the privilege that is ours to commune with God by faith, and to both experience and express our spiritual unity with other believers. Sometimes we call it *the Lord's Supper*, recalling the last supper of Jesus with His disciples and the new meaning Jesus gave to the bread and wine from the Passover meal. In some churches, the sacrament is called the *Eucharist*, from the Greek verb *eucharistein*, which means "to give thanks," for in the sacrament we not only remember what Jesus did for us on the cross, but we give thanks to God for His saving work on our behalf and the benefits of His grace to us.

Here at Faith, we usually refer to it as either *Communion* or *the Lord's Supper*. Whatever term we use for it, the sacrament is a visible, visual reminder of the suffering, sacrificial, redeeming love of Jesus for us. No doubt you have heard that a picture is worth a thousand words. No doubt it is true in this case. In this sacrament we are given a picture of grace

which can touch our souls deeply as a snapshot of one divine moment frozen in time, or as a motion picture which shows the unfolding of God's plan of salvation in the suffering and death of His Son on our behalf, Communion gives us a way of seeing and understanding the beauty, wonder, and power of God's love and grace. When we see the greatness of God's grace and the depth of His love made visible in what the bread and the cup of the sacrament symbolize, the only reasonable thing to do is to fall down in gratitude and praise before God, and to love Him and worship Him and serve Him with the whole of our being. Can I get an "Amen"?

In the same way that Christians and churches use different names for the sacrament, not all Christians and churches agree about the meaning of the Lord's Supper or what actually happens in Communion. In the two thousand years of church history since Jesus established the sacrament there have been four main interpretations of the meaning of the words of Jesus in giving the bread and wine to His disciples in the upper room. Some or all of these may be familiar to you. If they are, keep listening anyway. Maybe the Lord will surprise you with something you don't already know, or maybe He simply wants to remind you of something you already know, or He wants to use this to prepare you for a witnessing opportunity that He is preparing for you. Some of you may have come from a church tradition which has a different view of the sacrament from ours in the Reformed tradition and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC). Here are the four main views:

### **TRANSUBSTANTIATION**

First is the view of our friends in the Roman Catholic church, which is called *transubstantiation*. *Transubstantiation* is a big word which stands for the Roman Catholic teaching that in the sacrament, which Catholics refer to as the Mass, the bread and wine are mysteriously and miraculously changed in substance, and they actually become the literal body and blood of Jesus. The elements still have the appearance of bread and wine. They still have the physical properties of bread and wine. But in their essence, in substance, they are transformed and become the actual body and blood of Jesus, who is offered up again and again as a sacrifice for sin every time the mass is celebrated.

The basis for this belief in transubstantiation is taken from the words of Jesus Himself who, when giving the bread to His disciples, said: "This is my body" (Matthew 26:26). And in offering the cup to them, He said: "This is my blood" (26:28). Catholics believe the word "is" is to be taken in its literal sense here, even though Jesus often spoke of Himself and His ministry in symbolic or metaphorical ways. For example: "I am the gate" (John 10:7, 9). "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). "I am the vine" (John 15:1, 5). There are many other examples both in the teaching of Jesus and in different parts of the Bible. It is obvious that Jesus does not mean that He is any of these things in a physical or material sense, but that in His life and ministry He symbolized these things. Unlike our Roman Catholic friends, in the Reformed tradition of the Christian faith, we believe that when Jesus gave the bread to His disciples and said: "This is my body," what He meant was: "This represents my body" or "This symbolizes my body." With the cup, what He meant for the disciples to understand was: "This represents (or symbolizes) my blood, which is poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins."

## **CONSUBSTANTIATION**

A second view of the sacrament comes from Martin Luther, whose break with Rome over the authority of the Bible and the doctrine of justification by faith ignited the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In Luther's view, known as *consubstantiation*, the bread and wine are not literally changed into the actual body and blood of Jesus. But Luther nevertheless believed in the real physical presence of Jesus in the sacrament, so that the body and blood of Jesus are literally present in, with, and through the bread and wine. I believe this continues to be the view of Lutheran Christians today.

## **A MEMORIAL**

A third view was advanced by a 16<sup>th</sup> century Swiss Reformer named Ulrich Zwingli. Zwingli, along with others, believed that the word "is" as used by Jesus in the institution of the Lord's Supper means "represents," and that the sacrament is simply a memorial. Nothing more. That is, its sole purpose is for remembering what Jesus did in giving His life for us on the cross. This view is held by many Christians today, including most Baptists.

## **REAL SPIRITUAL PRESENCE**

The fourth view, the one that makes the most sense biblically and theologically to me (and the one we embrace as a church), is the view of John Calvin and the Reformed tradition of the Christian faith. Calvin agreed with Zwingli that the Lord's Supper is a memorial. When we observe the sacrament, we remember Jesus and what He did for us. But Calvin disagreed with Zwingli's belief that it is *only* a memorial meal and nothing more. Calvin also differed with both Luther and the Roman Catholic Church over the doctrines of consubstantiation and transubstantiation. Calvin and subsequent proponents of Reformed theology rejected a belief in the physical presence of Jesus in the sacrament, but affirmed the true spiritual presence of Jesus in the sacrament, a presence that is perceived by faith in the heart of the believer. When we receive the bread and cup in an attitude of trusting faith, we are able (by God's grace) to discern and feel the presence and love of our Savior.

Do the elements used in Communion – the bread and wine, or, in our case, bread and grape juice – actually change and become the body and blood of Jesus to be offered as a sacrifice again? No. They represent the body and blood of Jesus. They are symbols which give us a picture of His redeeming love and grace. When we partake of the bread and the cup in Communion we remember with thanksgiving what Jesus did for us. We commemorate, as it says in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, "Christ's offering up of Himself, by Himself, on the cross once for all," and offer up to God every possible praise for His sacrifice (WCF 29.2). The sacrament is meant to be understood as a visible depiction of the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross, which was for us. It is a visible sign of the invisible grace of forgiveness and cleansing from sin, being declared righteous in God's sight, reconciled to God, adopted as a beloved son or daughter of our Father in heaven, accepted, loved, changed.

The bread and wine in Communion do not change in their substance. But the grace to which they point changes us. It has changed me. God is still using it to change me. It is by this grace and nothing else that we are saved. God uses the grace to which the bread and wine point to remind us that we belong to Him, to nourish our faith, to convict us of our sin and to draw us back to Him when we stray, and to inspire and equip us to extend His love and grace to anyone in need.

The Lord's Supper is not merely a picture of God's grace. It is a masterpiece. It is a priceless expression of God's love for undeserving sinners. For you and me.

There is one more thing I need to say about the sacrament: It is not for everybody. Not everyone is free to take part in it. It is not for unbelievers. It is not for anyone who does not trust in Jesus Christ as the true Son of God and only Savior of sinners. And it is not for anyone who professes to believe in Christ but is living in unrepentant, willful rebellion against Him.

For whom, then, is it? It is for sinners who know they (we) need a Savior. It is for sinners who know they (we) do not deserve mercy or grace from God. All repentant sinners who trust in the saving work of Jesus Christ alone are welcome at the Lord's Table, regardless of what you may have done or how far from God you may have been. It is for forgiven sinners who have been washed clean by the blood of Jesus.

There is a story about an old Scottish believer attending a communion service in a Highland church one day. He was feeling so down, so defeated, so personally unworthy that when the bread and the cup were passed, he felt he couldn't take them. So he allowed them to pass. As he sat there feeling miserable in his spirit, he noticed a girl in the congregation who also allowed the elements to pass, and then broke down into tears. Her tears jarred him back to the truth of the gospel he himself needed to recall. In a whisper that could be heard across the church, he was heard to say: "Take it, lassie. Take it. It is meant for sinners." And he himself partook. (Source: James S. Stewart, "The Rending of the Veil," at [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).)

The grace pictured in the Lord's Supper is meant for sinners who turn to the Lord Jesus in humble and heartfelt repentance, and trust Him in faith to save us from our sins and to give us His grace and power to live for Him.

May it be so in us, in each of us, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.