

“By Your Spirit: Jesus, Unity, and Holy Communion”¹

Annual Conference 2017 Bible Study, Saturday Morning

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I trust you’ve been getting enough to eat here in Hershey, the Sweetest Place on Earth. Another delegate told me he has eaten more chocolate over the last three days than he had in the previous six months. I won’t mention that person’s name, but it was my dad. My family came to the Bishop’s Retreat here in January, and we were all amazed to see, and taste, chocolate ketchup. I’m probably not alone in thinking, “I could get used to the food at the Hershey Lodge.”

This morning I’d like to talk about another feast, the feast that we call “Holy Communion.” In that case there’s no chocolate involved, but there is something sweeter still—the sweetness of the grace, holiness, and loving presence of Jesus our Lord. How fitting, then, for Charles Wesley to call the Lord’s Supper “the gospel feast.” The language Wesley uses is vivid and profound: **“Come and partake the gospel feast, be saved from sin, in Jesus rest; O taste the goodness of our God, and eat his flesh and drink his blood. [next slide] See him set forth before your eyes; behold the bleeding sacrifice; his offered love make haste to embrace, and freely now be saved by grace. [next slide] Ye who believe his record true shall sup with him and he with you; come to the feast, be saved from sin, for Jesus waits to take you in.”** Some of this language resounds with a striking, even shocking, realism—“O taste the goodness of our God, and eat his flesh and drink his blood.” We might wonder, “Where did Charles Wesley get this language?” The answer, of course, is from Jesus himself, in John 6:53, for example, where Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” And continuing on, our Lord explains: “For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.” Charles Wesley immersed himself in the Scriptures, and his hymns are full of scriptural quotations and allusions (much like his brother John’s sermons). It has been said that if the Bible were

¹ Some of this material is adapted from my book, *Holy Communion: Celebrating God with Us* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014).

lost, a skillful person “might extract much of it from Wesley’s hymns. They contain the Bible in solution.”²

Thinking about this “gospel feast” as Wesley beautifully calls it, I’d like us to reflect on the topic of Communion during our time together this morning. I’ve entitled this session “**By Your Spirit: Jesus, Unity, and Holy Communion.**” Each of you should get a bookmark as a handout; I’ll refer to that later. Our Scripture reading comes from Luke chapter 22. Hear the Word of the Lord:

22 “Now the Festival of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was approaching, ² and the chief priests and the teachers of the law were looking for some way to get rid of Jesus, for they were afraid of the people. ³ Then Satan entered Judas, called Iscariot, one of the Twelve.⁴ And Judas went to the chief priests and the officers of the temple guard and discussed with them how he might betray Jesus. ⁵ They were delighted and agreed to give him money. ⁶ He consented, and watched for an opportunity to hand Jesus over to them when no crowd was present.

⁷ Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. ⁸ Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, “Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover.”

⁹ “Where do you want us to prepare for it?” they asked.

¹⁰ He replied, “As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, ¹¹ and say to the owner of the house, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ ¹² He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there.”

¹³ They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover.

¹⁴ When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table.¹⁵ And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover

² J. Ernest Rattenbury, *The Evangelical Doctrines of Charles Wesley’s Hymns*, 3rd edition (London: Epworth Press, 1954), 48.

with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.”

¹⁷ After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. ¹⁸ For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.”

¹⁹ And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. ²¹ But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. ²² The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But woe to that man who betrays him!” ²³ They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.

²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. ²⁵ Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. ²⁶ But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. ²⁷ For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. ²⁸ You are those who have stood by me in my trials. ²⁹ And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, ³⁰ so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

The Word of God for the people of God. “Thanks be to God.”

In this passage, Luke gives us an account of how Judas agrees to betray Jesus, and that account leads right into the Last Supper. Judas, of course, was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus, but he would betray our Lord. Imagine what that must have been like from the perspective of Jesus. He knew that one of the twelve would betray him. Yet he allowed his betrayer to be part of that special gathering when he instituted the Lord’s Supper on the night in which he gave himself up for us. As Jesus told the disciples, “The hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table.” Judas shared a certain unity with Jesus; they were in the same place, and they were

participating in the same act together, but they came to that sacred gathering with radically different intentions—Judas was intent on betraying Jesus, and Jesus was intent on fulfilling his purpose. In a sense, Judas' thinking at that point was "Not THY will be done, O God, but MY will be done." Jesus' mindset was the exact opposite—complete surrender to the good and saving purposes of his Father, even at unspeakable personal cost and sacrifice, out of his great love for us all. Judas and Jesus were there at the same event, participating in the same act together, but they were far from united in heart and will. Simply because we show up at the same place does not necessarily mean that we are united. Simply because we participate in the same activities does not necessarily mean that we are united. My wife could tell you that we may be in the same room, even talking with one another, but she can tell when I am not really with her. Guys, you know that look. True unity in Christ involves more than just being in the same place and doing the same things together; true unity in Christ involves the interior disposition of our hearts aligning with the heart of Jesus himself.

This year's Annual Conference gathering has a twofold theme, unity and prayer. We've been reminded of the prayer of Jesus in John 17 that all who believe in him, even us today, would be one in him as he and the Father are one so that the world may believe the good news. And now, against the backdrop of that powerful and challenging prayer of Jesus, I'd like us to consider our prayers and in particular a special prayer of the church, the eucharistic prayer or the words of prayer associated with the sacrament of Holy Communion. For those words, contained in our hymnal, truly are words of prayer. By the way, I'm deeply grateful for the emphasis on prayer at this year's Annual Conference. We've focused on prayer this year more than any other year I've attended. I hope that is a sign of what is to come. For those who made the decision to include prayer so prominently in our Conference agenda, and for our Bishop's commitment to calling us to prayer, let's show our appreciation. The words of the eucharistic prayer emphasize the themes of thanksgiving, confession, forgiveness, and unity, topics particularly worth exploring for such a time as this.

Some experiences leave us so grateful that all we can say in response, whether aloud or in our hearts, is simply “Thank you. Thank you.” When our son Zeke was born following some difficult complications with the pregnancy, my wife Molly and I were overjoyed. All we could say was “Thank you. Thank you.” In the weeks and months that followed, it was more like: “Thank you...and please, God, help us get more sleep.”

In the Lord’s Supper, we join our voices with the church from across time and space in a continual prayer of thanksgiving. We say to God, “Thank you. Thank you.” Viewing the Lord’s Supper for what it is, namely, a prayer thanking the God of our salvation, brings into focus the profound spiritual meaning of what is said and done during this part of worship. It is not an act to rush through but one to form us, deep within our hearts and lives. Communion is far from the empty ritual that some might see it as today. Instead, this gift of God’s grace actually makes possible, for us, a fresh encounter with the living God—together, as God’s people.

In what follows, I’m going to highlight aspects of the liturgy or order of worship as found in *The United Methodist Hymnal* for the celebration of Holy Communion. These words are familiar to many of us. The words might be so familiar that we don’t think about them much. Today we’re going to consider their meaning. My hope is that this time of reflection will deepen our understanding and renew our appreciation for the significance of Communion in our churches and lives today.

The words of invitation to commune with Christ and with others in his name set the tone for what follows: **“Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another. Therefore, let us confess our sin before God and one another.”**

Who doesn’t like to be invited to a party or celebration? Receiving an invitation is like an affirmation that yes, I am known and valued. You, personally, are known and valued. Out of love, Christ invites us all to come to him and find rest for our souls (Matthew 11:28-30). We respond to the Lord by faith and in prayer.

It is fitting for us to begin that response with a prayer of confession. Confession may be out of style in a largely therapeutic age, like our own, that teaches us to feel good about ourselves and to think the best about who we are and what we do and say. Nevertheless, if we truly wish to enter God’s presence, then we had better come clean.

The Scriptures teach us that basic point, as we see in the experience of the prophet Isaiah before the Lord. Isaiah had a vision of God in the temple—“sitting on a throne, high and lofty” and surrounded by angels proclaiming that God is “holy, holy, holy”—and that vision overwhelmed the prophet (Isaiah 6:1, 3). Isaiah wrote, “The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’” (Isaiah 6:4-5) Later, the coal cleansed Isaiah’s lips. His sin was forgiven, and he was sent forth to serve as a representative of God. We, too, can be cleansed and sent forth in God’s service.

The prayer of confession represents a candid, sobering acknowledgment that before God, all our pain and brokenness is exposed, and we are fully known. Ultimately, the purpose of confession is not for self-loathing but for God’s glory and for our good, that we may be restored to right relationship with God. By confessing our sins, we humble ourselves before God and ask God to forgive us, heal us, and raise us up to live a new and better life.

So as we prepare to commune with God, the church teaches us to pray, and I invite you to join me in saying this prayer now: **“Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy.”**

A friend of mine had the courage and faith to pray this prayer: “God, if there are parts of my life that do not honor you, chip away at them until they crumble and disintegrate.” Sure enough, she found in the following weeks and months that Jesus was chipping away at those parts of her life that were not pleasing to him. She was being refined by the refiner’s fire. That purging was sometimes uncomfortable, but she had prayed that God would do this. My friend admitted that sometimes she said to herself, “Why did I pray that prayer?” She almost wished she had played it safe and not prayed like that after all. Later, though, she came to see that through that prayer God was molding and shaping

her character. As she explained, God was helping her be more loving toward others, particularly the people she was finding it difficult to love. God's response to her prayer revealed to her some additional confession that was necessary in her life.

Each of us would do well to ask: "What have I done, said, or thought that is not pleasing to God? Are there edges in my life that need to be chipped away and smoothed out, so that I can grow in the love of God and neighbor?" Through prayer and confession, God will continually refine us.

Within the United Methodist Church, we stand in constant need of refinement and renewal. Specifically at this juncture in our life together we face serious questions about whether we can even continue as one church united in Jesus. Unity is a gift of Jesus, a gift that our Lord continually offers us but does not force upon us. Now we face the tragic possibility that within the UMC we might have squandered that gift of unity. The situation is complex and can't be reduced to a single issue. Underneath the disagreement about sexuality are deeper, more significant disagreements about divine revelation, the nature of God, the purpose of the church, and the identity of Jesus. The disunity within the UMC concerning such core matters has brought us to an impasse. Visible disunity amounts to a direct denial of Jesus' prayer in John 17 for the unity of his followers so that the world may believe. So what should we do? Now is the time for us to humble ourselves, and to be honest before God and one another about our painful divisions. Now is the time to confess our persistent tendencies to stray from God's ways and to confess how we allow ourselves to be distracted from the primary mission that God has given us, which is what? Let's say it together: "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Friends, now is the time to seek the Lord's healing mercy and steadfast truth if we wish to remain united in any meaningful sense—united with one another and above all with God, in covenantal faithfulness.

Yes, such unity involves love, and precisely because it involves love it also involves accountability to God and mutual accountability, in love, to one another. When Jesus asks Peter three times "Do you love me?" immediately after each time Peter says "Yes," Jesus then gives him a specific command, to demonstrate that love and put it into practice (John 21:15-17). Love and Christ-centered accountability go together in the economy of God's grace.

On the subject of confession, it can be tempting for us to focus on those with whom we disagree or don't particularly like and then say to ourselves, "Yes, they have a lot that they need to confess." Of course, that attitude misses the point. As the adage goes, when you point a finger at someone else there are three fingers pointing back to you. Confession and repentance must begin at home. Jesus says, "first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Matthew 7:5). We remove the log from our own eyes through confession and repentance.

After naming what alienates us from God and others, in the Communion liturgy we appeal for God's mercy and deliverance: "**Forgive us, we pray.**" We pray that Christ, out of the abundance of his mercy, would forgive and restore us, like he forgave and restored Peter who also denied him by his words and actions (John 21:15-19). "**Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord.**" This part of the preparation to receive the Eucharist—this corporate prayer rooted in Scripture—concludes with reference to the transformative power of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Jesus, who alone is in a position to condemn, still forgives sinners and calls us, like he did the woman so long ago, to go and sin no more (John 8:11).

Through confession, we tap into a power to love that is vastly greater than anything we possess or could muster up on our own. Corrie Ten Boom once encountered a former Nazi prison guard whom she remembered from the concentration camp where she had been held captive. Her family had been arrested for hiding Jews in their home during the Nazi occupation of Holland. She and her sister Betsie were sent to Ravensbrück concentration camp, where this man was a guard. Betsie was one of the many people who died in that place of intense suffering.

Several years later, Corrie saw the man again in a church in Munich. It was 1947, and she had come from Holland to vanquished, dilapidated Germany in order to share the message of God's forgiveness. She used the image of the sea to describe where forgiven sins were thrown. "When we confess our sins," she said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever." After her talk most people filed out in somber silence, except for one man who was working his way forward to speak with her. It was the

former prison guard. The mere sight of that man brought back dreadful memories for Corrie, including the shame of having to strip down and walk naked past him. Of course, she thought of Betsie as well.

That same man now stood in front of her. He held out his hand to her and spoke up: “A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!” She did not think he could possibly remember her, one prisoner among the thousands of women, but she certainly remembered him, one of her former captors. Rather than take his hand, she awkwardly rooted around in her pocketbook. He went on to explain that after serving as a guard at Ravensbrück he had become a Christian. He said, “I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein”—again the hand came out—“will you forgive me?” She stood there and could not forgive. She could not forgive the man who served as a guard in the cold and brutal place where her sister had died. Corrie recounts the experience in these powerful words:

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there—hand held out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that....

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. “Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!” For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.³

Hearing this remarkable story, I need to ask myself, “Who are those whom I have yet to forgive with all my heart?” And, friends, I need to ask you, “Who are those whom you have yet to forgive with all your heart?” Forgiveness and love have a vertical dimension, pertaining to our relationship with God. They also have a horizontal dimension that pertains to our relationships with other people. Those two dimensions intersect in the form of a cross, the ultimate symbol of what God has done to redeem us in Christ.

As much as, in our pride, we might wish to skip over confession or pretend there is no need to confess, in the acknowledgment of our sinfulness and brokenness, there is good news for us all. During the service of Holy Communion, following the corporate confession and prayers of personal confession in silence, the word of the Gospel breaks through: **“Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God’s love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!”** The people repeat the news because it is too good not to share. Will you say it together now? **“In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!”**

When has something so great happened to you that you simply had to spread the word? Perhaps it was the birth of a child, or a job promotion, or even the thrill of winning an exciting game. After the Chicago Cubs finally won the World Series last year, the crowd at their victory celebration was estimated at five million people! Chicago was celebrating. Good news is meant to be shared. The

³ Corrie Ten Boom, “I’m Still Learning to Forgive,” *Guidepost Magazine*, 1972.

Gospel is good news. The word “Gospel” means good news. Certainly, the message of God’s forgiveness for us in Christ warrants a joyful response from thankful hearts, overflowing in gratitude and praise to God.

That is the aim of this portion of the liturgy. After hearing the good news of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, the pastor and people declare together, “**Glory to God. Amen.**” Then, as forgiven and reconciled people, we exchange signs and words of God’s peace, and offer ourselves and our gifts to God. There is always the possibility of merely going through the motions here, as elsewhere in worship, but when we reflect on these words and actions, we can gain a greater appreciation of their significance, and in that way we come to participate more fully in the church’s praise of God.

Up to this point in worship, we have confessed our sins, received God’s word of pardon, shared in the peace, and offered ourselves and our gifts anew to God. We are now prepared for the next step toward deeper closeness with God. Now the pastor and people are ready to engage in a fourfold movement that draws us all into the presence of God through the gift of Holy Communion. It is a movement patterned after the actions of Jesus himself, who took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples (see, for example, Mark 14:22).

First, the pastor takes the bread and cup, and prepares them for the meal. For all that we have experienced of God’s presence so far, there is more to come. As the sight of the bread and cup signifies, the one who is God with us prepares a place for us, for the refreshment of our souls.

Second, for the blessing of the elements, the pastor and people celebrate what is often called **the Great Thanksgiving**. The word “Eucharist” derives from the Greek term meaning “thanksgiving.” The Great Thanksgiving is all a prayer, and it begins with the traditional call to prayer and then the pastor instructs the people, “Lift up your hearts.” The response indicates the true recipient of these words of prayer, “We lift them up to the Lord.” With our hearts lifted up to the Lord, we “give thanks to the Lord our God.”

Then the pastor addresses God directly, in a sweeping summary of salvation history:

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. You formed us in your image and breathed into us the breath of life. When we turned away, and our love failed, your love remained steadfast. You delivered us from captivity, made covenant to be our sovereign God, and spoke to us through your prophets. And so, with your people on earth and all the company of heaven we praise your name and join their unending hymn.

This story becomes our story, and we can identify with both the triumphs and the struggles of God's people across the ages. We can see from our own lives as well the significance of remembering in this way. Consider, for example, the life and legacy of Rosa Parks. She worked prophetically to right a wrong—the societal injustice of racial discrimination—and she was motivated in large part by her Christian faith. Parks remained committed to the church unto death. The church's story of God's deliverance had guided and inspired the life of this woman, a life that had, in turn, inspired others. At Parks' viewing in Montgomery, Alabama in 2005 "Condoleezza Rice...[stated] that 'without Mrs. Parks, I probably would not be standing here today as Secretary of State.'"⁴ Our God is the God of deliverance, who breaks the chains of injustice and sets the oppressed free. In Communion, we claim the history of God's salvation as our own. Or, perhaps more aptly, we are claimed by that defining story, and we are called by God to live it in our own day and age.

During the service of the Lord's Supper, together all the people, echoing the chorus of praise sung by the angels in Isaiah's vision of God, lift their voices, and again I invite you to join me in in proclaiming: **"Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest."** The term

⁴ Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013), vii.

Hosanna, meaning “save” or “rescue,” was the shout of praise made in recognition of Jesus as the Messiah during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Christians remember that event each year on Palm Sunday, usually marked by a ritual reenactment of how people lined the streets of Jerusalem, spread their cloaks on the road, and waved leafy branches from the fields as they welcomed Jesus. Here in the Lord’s Supper, those words help us welcome Jesus our Savior and recognize his presence among us still today. Uniquely and decisively, Jesus is the one who comes in the Lord’s name. He is the Lord, and he has come to us and is with us now. That is what this prayer of thanksgiving celebrates.

God’s actions in creation and redemption reach their wondrous climax in Jesus Christ, the sole Savior of the world. Jesus is the unique and universal Savior. Echoing both the Scriptures and the Nicene Creed, John Wesley proclaimed this about Jesus: “I believe that he is the proper, natural Son of God, God of God, very God of very God; and that he is the Lord of all, having absolute, supreme, universal dominion over all things; but more peculiarly, our Lord who believe in him.” Wesley enthusiastically affirmed the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus in these words: “I believe that Jesus was made man, joining the human nature with the divine in one person.” As John’s Gospel tells us, Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is the unmitigated revelation of God to us and for us, as the One who is God with us.

During a visit to Rome, I didn’t think my trip would be complete without the purchase of an icon. There is no shortage of icon options in Rome. I found one I liked, got the shopkeeper’s attention, and pointed to the image I wanted to buy, which depicted Jesus holding the Bible. There were so many icons in the store that the man mistakenly thought I had pointed to an image of Jesus holding a closed Bible. So he climbed up on the ladder and began taking that one down for me. I wanted to buy the one right next to it, with Jesus holding and pointing to an open Bible rather than a closed one **[picture]**. In broken Italian I said to the shopkeeper as I motioned, “No, open.” They were both visually appealing images, but I wanted the one in particular for theological reasons. Jesus not only points to the Scriptures; he opens up the Scriptures. He unlocks the truth of which he himself is the key. As he did with the two sojourners on the Emmaus road, Jesus teaches us the things about himself in the Scriptures (Luke

24:27). Jesus opens the Scriptures to us so that our hearts might burn within us (Luke 24:32). Jesus still makes himself known in the breaking and blessing of the bread (Luke 24:30-31).

In the service of Holy Communion, the church's prayer begins to concentrate explicitly on the person at the center of our faith: **"Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ."** In his person and work, Jesus brings God's salvation to our world. Jesus establishes the kingdom of God here and now by his presence and power. **"Your Spirit anointed him to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, and to announce that the time had come when you would save your people."** At the start of his ministry, Jesus summarized his mission by quoting these words from Isaiah 61:1-2 and then announcing that this Scripture has been fulfilled in him (see Luke 4:16-21). Jesus, the prayer of thanksgiving continues, **"healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners"**—actions central to his ministry (see, for example, John 4:43-54, Matthew 14:15-21, and Mark 2:13-17). The upshot of what Christ has done is the formation of a community of God's people, the church, as in this allusion to Romans chapter 6: **"By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your church, delivered us from slavery to sin and death, and made with us a new covenant by water and the Spirit."** Then we hear once more, fittingly, the abiding promise made by Jesus before he ascended to heaven: **"When the Lord Jesus ascended, he promised to be with us always, in the power of your Word and Holy Spirit"** (see Matthew 28:20).

That promise leads to a further sharpening of the focus as the institution of the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

On the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."
When the supper was over, he took the cup, gave thanks

to you, gave it to his disciples, and said: “Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

God’s radical self-giving in Jesus Christ—withholding nothing and giving everything, even his own life—demands our own self-giving, as reflected in these words: **“And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ, we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ’s offering for us, as we proclaim the mystery of faith.”** Together, the people summarize our faith in three short but potent phrases; let’s say them aloud now: **“Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.”**

This is a mystery not in the sense of an unsolvable riddle or puzzle, or a matter about which we have no idea. Rather, God’s saving work in Christ is a mystery that our faith allows us to discern, embrace, and grow to understand more fully even if we can never completely comprehend its inexhaustible splendor. Yet there are many people today, including some in the church, who do not know much about Jesus and what he has done, or about what C.S. Lewis famously calls “mere Christianity.”⁵ When a hospital chaplain asked people “Would you like Holy Communion?” he received these replies: one person said, “No thanks, I asked for Cornflakes”; another responded, “No thanks, I’ve never been circumcised.”⁶ The claims of Christianity might sound irrelevant and undesirable when a basic understanding is lacking, but through the work of the Holy Spirit, appropriate instruction and formation can lead others to see the wisdom of God revealed in Jesus Christ. The Eucharist, like our faith itself, revolves around the

⁵ In his book *Mere Christianity*, Lewis explores the common ground on which all Christians stand together. He uses the term “mere” not in the sense of meager or inadequate, but rather as an entry point into the fundamental teachings of historic Christianity.

⁶ Ronald Brown, editor, *Bishop’s Brew: An Anthology of Clerical Humour* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 1990), quoted by Nicky Gumbel, *Questions of Life* (Deerfield, IL: Alpha North America, 2007), 12.

grandeur of the incarnation. That is what we affirm as we prepare to commune with Christ and with his people.

Then, as the eucharistic prayer continues, the pastor invokes the blessing of the Holy Spirit to make real all that God has promised to bestow on the faithful through Holy Communion.

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. By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet. Through your Son Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit in your holy church, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, now and for ever.

This portion of the prayer highlights a profound truth of the Christian faith: through the Eucharist, the Holy Spirit brings us into union with God and therefore with one another in the service of Christ. The people, in faithful approval of this request, say “Amen” which means “May it be so.” So after the pastor takes the bread and cup in the first of four phases preparing us to commune with Christ, the words quoted a moment ago represent our joining of Jesus’ own prayer—his prayer when he instituted this sacrament—in the second movement of the liturgy of Holy Communion, blessing those elements with thanksgiving. So we’ve talked about the first two steps of this fourfold movement, take and bless.

Next, in the **third** stage of this prayer of thanksgiving, **the pastor breaks the bread**, typically while saying, in the words of St. Paul, “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. The bread which we break is a sharing in the body of Christ” (see 1 Corinthians 10:16-17). The pastor lifts the cup in silence or while saying, “The cup over which we give thanks is a sharing in the blood of Christ” (see 1 Corinthians 10:16). The

lifting of the consecrated elements corresponds to the lifting of our prayers before the throne of God, including this prayer of thanksgiving for all that God has done, is doing, and will do for us in Christ. Ushered by prayer into the presence of God, we see in the breaking of the bread and lifting of the cup a visual reminder that at the heart of God's life is self-giving love, broken and poured out for us and for the life of the world.

Since all things have now been made ready, we come to **the fourth and final movement** of the Communion liturgy, **the giving of the bread and cup**. In these sacred moments, the bread and wine are given to the people, accompanied by two simple phrases that speak of a mystery truly divine: "The body of Christ, given for you. The blood of Christ, given for you." *This is a high point in the life of the church, and in our lives as believers*. Here our search for God finds its earthly fulfillment. Here, by tasting and drinking of God's abundant goodness, we experience the presence of God with us. Here we encounter God because God has chosen first to come to us in Christ. Communion with God is holy, or set apart, since God, the object and agent of our communion, is holy. In the midst of the sheer holiness of this part of worship, the congregation sings or prays silently while the bread and cup are given. When all have received, the Lord's altar is put in order.

What happens in worship and especially in the Eucharist takes us to the heart of the Christian life. At its essential core that life is a sharing, through the Holy Spirit, in the life and love of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. Through the service of Holy Communion, we remember and celebrate all that Christ gives us in this meal, particularly the gift of his grace, his presence and power for, in, and through us.

John Wesley spoke of "the duty of constant communion" in a sermon of that same name, a sermon title adapted from a text by Robert Nelson called *The Great Duty of Frequenting the Christian Sacrifice*.⁷ Not content with the idea of "frequent

⁷ *The Great Duty of Frequenting the Christian Sacrifice* was published in 1707 by Robert Nelson. In 1732, Wesley wrote an extract of that treatise for use among Methodists. The shift of emphasis from Nelson's "frequenting the Christian sacrifice" to Wesley's "constant communion" was likely suggested by another tract also read by the early Methodists, *The Constant Communicant* (1681) by Arthur Bury. Wesley wrote his sermon "The Duty of Constant Communion" as an abridgement and revision of his 1732 extract of Nelson's text. When he published the sermon in 1787, Wesley noted that he had not yet "seen cause to alter my sentiments in any point" in that discourse—which shows a strong consistency over time in his views on the importance of the Lord's Supper in the Christian life. The fact that such a low view of its significance is common among Wesley's heirs today is both unfortunate and ironic.

communion,” Wesley argues in this sermon that it is the duty of every Christian to receive the Lord’s Supper constantly, as it were—and by that he means as often as possible. No, he did not say we should snack as often as we want or drink green tea as much as Charlie Salisbury. [picture] I’m just having a little fun at the expense of my District Superintendent; sorry, Charlie, but I couldn’t resist. Seriously, because Jesus commands us to participate in the Lord’s Supper, and because of the benefits that we receive as we do, our communion with the Lord in the Eucharist is to be so determinative and abiding as to be “constant,” according to Wesley. Constant communion with Jesus—how far we have come from such a vision of the Christian life! Is it any wonder that so many of our churches, and our people, are spiritually depleted?

The church needs to reclaim its commitment to faithful, active, joyful participation in the sacrament of Holy Communion, understood for what it truly is—neither a dull and basically meaningless ritual nor an optional extra for those so inclined, but in fact a fresh and formative encounter for one and all with the risen Christ himself. In order to become more fully alive in Christ, we should be certain to use to its full extent this great gift that God has given us in the Lord’s Supper, an untapped well of authentic spirituality and the promise of hope made real to us through the living presence of Jesus Christ.

There are many helpful resources available to pastors and lay people as they seek a renewed and growing spiritual vitality in their own daily lives and throughout their churches and wider communities. Yet, could it be that what we need most of all is simply a greater attentiveness to God, and to those primary means of grace that we call prayer, Scripture, and Holy Communion? Could it be that the Holy Spirit is ready and willing to transform us, even us? Could it be that all we need in order to live in the abundance of Christ’s love God has already given to us? As we read in the Psalms, those timeless prayers of God’s people, “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed are those who take refuge in him” (34:8).

I’d like to call your attention to the bookmark handout. If you have not received one, please look around your or if necessary raise a hand and will the tellers please see that everyone gets one? On the front of the bookmark you can see the prayer from the hymnal; it also appears on the screen. Will you pray those words aloud with me now? **“By your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry**

to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet.”

Notice what we are asking here: we are praying that by the Holy Spirit *God* will make us one in a particular way, one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. The unity to which Jesus calls us isn't a vague, bland, insipid unity, nor is it a unity in name only. Instead, this unity is vigorous and lively—it's also beautiful, and it takes a specific shape and form: it is rooted in Jesus and directed toward his ongoing mission in the world. We have a part to play in that mission. Yet, unity in Jesus is not about us making ourselves one. Unity in Jesus is not based on our sheer willpower, but rather on the will and power of God as expressed in Jesus' fervent prayer for unity in John 17. Unity in Jesus is God's gift for us to receive continually, and through that gift we discover our common mission and are strengthened in it. We can say that we are united without actually living as one in the unity that Jesus desires for us and offers us.

That unity is the gift of the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is God's eternal, triune name according to Scripture, the ecumenical councils and creeds, and the doctrinal standards of the UMC. To be clear, that doesn't necessarily mean that God is male. I believe that God transcends gender, yet in a special way the classical trinitarian language gives us the revealed name of God. I say this in love, but if we can't acknowledge that basic point then our theology is needlessly misguided and we must ask ourselves where this is in fact the God we are worshiping (or whether it is another god, perhaps fashioned in our own image). And because this unity we're talking about is God's gift, it comes on God's terms, not merely on our own. We desperately need God's help if we are going to live as one in Christ—not just to say that we are united, but actually to live as united in Jesus. To embody that aspiration, we need God. That is true for Christians in every time and place, and certainly it is true for us at this critical juncture in the life of the UMC. We desperately need God!

In Luke's account of the Last Supper, we read that Jesus “eagerly desired” to eat that holy meal with the apostles before he suffered. I believe that Jesus eagerly desires to meet us in Holy Communion as well, and to fulfill the prayer that we would be made one with him and one with each other in ministry to this world that God so loves.

There are obstacles to the unity that Jesus wants for us—**obstacles to that unity in the UMC, in our local churches, and in our own lives**. Those obstacles can't be overcome if they are not first identified. So on the back of your bookmark you see space for you to write down those obstacles to unity in Jesus. There's not much space, but at least it's enough to start. In a moment I will give you time to reflect, to list what comes to mind in those 3 areas—obstacles to unity in Jesus in the UMC, your local church, and your own life—and to answer the question "What must change?" The information also appears on the screen. Take about 5 minutes now for prayerful reflection as you complete this exercise. **(Slide with music for 5-7 minutes. Music stops as session resumes.)**

Let's come back together. Each day for the next year I will be praying the prayer on the front of the bookmark and reflecting on the answers on the back. For the sake of Christ and our beloved UMC, I invite you to join me in this spiritual discipline. Keep your bookmark in your Bible or another place where you will see it often and can refer to it regularly as a tool for reflection and prayer. My hope with this handout is that it might help promote unity in Jesus—authentic, vibrant, God-honoring unity—in our own lives, our churches, our Conference, and even beyond, in keeping with the themes of unity and prayer that Bishop Park has chosen to lift up.

The unity we have in Jesus, and the unity we seek in Jesus, is unity given to us by the Holy Spirit. In a special way we celebrate that unity, and grow more deeply into mystical union with Christ and one another, through this "gospel feast"—Holy Communion.

With God's help, we can go forward together as the Holy Spirit leads us in faithful covenantal relationships with God and one another. We can go forward as we fix our eyes not on ourselves, and not primarily on the challenges before us (though we should certainly be aware of them). But we can and must go forward as we fix our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith. In Matthew chapter 7, Jesus talks about two houses, one built on sand and one built on rock. The rain falls, the floods come, and the winds blow and beat on each house. The house built on sand collapses and is ruined, while the house

built on rock withstands the storm and remains intact. Why? The difference lies in the foundation.

Jesus is our foundation, the solid rock. Jesus is our hope. Jesus is our Lord and the Lord of all, crucified and risen from the dead. It's not just that Jesus inspires the rise of Easter faith in our hearts. The resurrection means so much more than that. It's no mere metaphor or myth. Ask the martyrs; would they die for that? Jesus actually died and now he is actually risen, bodily, from the dead. He says, "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again" (John 10:18). Jesus is alive and active in the world today, and he is calling us to follow in faith individually and together—to be, truly, **one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet**. As God leads us into deeper communion and faithful unity in Jesus, we will see amazing things. We'll see lives changed, churches revitalized, and communities transformed to the glory of God. By the power of the Holy Spirit, may it be so. In Jesus' name, amen!