



Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



Unit 2: Understanding the Nature and Action of God

Session 8: More Than a Memory—Meeting God at the Table

“What is Wrong with My Dad?”

I was raised in a Christian household with a United Methodist father and a faithful mother who was an active member of a congregation from another denomination. I worshiped with both my parents, alternating between Mom and Dad every other Sunday. This was a great experience for me, with one significant exception. It was not uncommon for the three of us to worship together. All was well when my Mom attended the UMC, but when my Dad attended my mom’s church something was different. My mother’s denomination had rules about who was allowed to participate in Holy Communion. I knew that not every denomination permitted children to participate, so the fact that I was not welcome at Holy Communion was not a big problem for me. But when my dad was not welcome, that was a different story altogether. It made no sense to me why my mom’s church would not accept a faithful Christian adult such as my father at their communion table. Soon I was at the age of confirmation and I was called to choose between my mom’s church and the United Methodist Church. The choice was easy. I wanted to be a part of a church that practiced open communion.

The Belief and Practice of Holy Communion

The United Methodist Church is distinct from many Christian traditions in how we practice and understand Holy Communion. Some denominations, like The United Methodist Church, consider Holy Communion to be a sacrament. Some denominations do not. Depending on the customs of a congregation or denomination, grape juice or wine is used, as well as bread from that local culture. Some churches use unleavened bread, to reflect the seder (Passover) meal. Some groups use a common cup for the wine or juice. Some denominations pray very specific prayers at Holy Communion, while others are less formal. In some congregations, people come forward and are either served standing or kneeling at a communion rail. In other traditions, people are served in their seats.

There are also many different beliefs about Holy Communion among Christian groups. For some denominational traditions, Holy Communion is considered to be an act of memorializing Jesus Christ, while others such as United Methodists believe the sacrament moves far beyond this notion and see it as an opportunity to connect to the living Christ. Some traditions believe that the essence of the bread (or Host) and the wine change to become the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ (transubstantiation), or that they retain both their essential condition as bread and wine but add on the essence of Jesus Christ (consubstantiation). So what do United Methodists believe?

Holy Communion as a Means of Grace

As with almost everything else, United Methodists believe that Holy Communion is a gift of God’s grace to the universal Church. Holy Communion is one of two sacraments (along with baptism), and it is considered to be a means of grace, one of the means by which God chooses to impart grace to people of faith (along with practices like Bible study, prayer, and fasting).

The communion table represents the table at the “great heavenly banquet” around which all Christians will gather when the Reign of God comes in all its fullness. Around it will be the great cloud of witnesses – the faithful believers who have lived and died before us. And this banquet table is indeed an open one, with Jesus Christ serving as the host and folks like you and me present as guests. Children are welcome at this table, just as they are at the table in the home. The table is “extended” when consecrated bread and juice are taken to those who cannot attend worship due to health or other serious reasons. Everyone is included. We are all gathered together to experience the grace and hope offered to us by the love of God the Father, according to the life, death, and resurrection of God the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Wesleyan Roots Session 8: More than a Memory—Meeting God at the Table

The Roots of Christ's Real Presence at an Open Table

There are two primary Wesleyan roots when it comes to Holy Communion. The first is the **open table** at which everyone is welcome. Our communion liturgy begins with this Invitation (Hymnal pg. 12): "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."

Our open table is a reflection of all the ways we understand grace. Christ invites us to the communion table before we even know the depth of Christ's love (prevenient grace), when we claim it deeply as our own (justifying grace), and as we seek to grow and be made perfect in love (sanctifying grace). So many people have been made to feel unworthy to come to the table and shamed for their sin. It is important to note that we believe that the grace of God through Jesus Christ is the gift that redeems us and that all are invited into this grace-filled relationship. No one who desires to participate will be turned away!

With that said, it is important to note that accountability and grace have always been connected in our Wesleyan heritage. We are called to sincerely confess our sin before God prior to receiving Holy Communion. While this is done privately with a priest in some traditions, in the UMC we pray a corporate prayer of confession, followed by a time of silent confession, prior to receiving Holy Communion.

It is important to understand our United Methodist beliefs concerning what happens during Holy Communion. For example, while we believe that the bread and juice of Holy Communion remain bread and juice, we also believe that Christ is truly present in the sacrament. This is called **real presence**, and it is an adaptation of an understanding from ancient Christian traditions. While Roman Catholics believe Christ is really present in the Host and the wine as it is essentially changed to the body and blood of Christ, United Methodists believe that Christ's real presence is with us at communion, but that the way in which that happens is a holy mystery.

Consider these words which are spoken at our "Great Thanksgiving," referred to as the epiclesis: "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."¹

These holy words offer us the opportunity to receive the Holy Spirit and to be one holy, redeemed people. They are essential for entering into the holy mystery and opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit's work in our lives. With this said, I urge you to expect something when you receive Holy Communion. You are meeting God at that table, and you will not leave without being changed for the better.

Marsha Engle Middleton

¹ *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992. P. 38.

United Methodist Identity Points:

- Holy Communion is a sacrament offering us an opportunity to experience the real spiritual presence of Christ in a unique way.
 - All people have access to Holy Communion within the United Methodist tradition. You do not need to be United Methodist, nor a member of another church, to respond to the invitation.
 - Holy Communion is a means of grace to us, serving as a conduit of God's love and mercy which we then can extend to others.
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Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- How do you understand Holy Communion? Do you experience the presence of God in the sacrament, or is it more of a memorial service to you?
 - What difference might it make in your experience of Holy Communion if you approached the table expecting God to be present?
 - How important is the “open table” to you? How would you describe this Wesleyan understanding to a non-Wesleyan friend or family member?
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