

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Distributed Church

Luke 22:14-20

In the COVID-19 economy, some products are in high demand. As you may have guessed, business has been brisk for prepackaged communion supplies. The way that congregations observe the Lord's Supper was one of the first worship practices impacted by the pandemic. A tradition that involves so much physical contact and touching, including actually consuming food and drink, was bound to be reassessed. When folks arrive on Sunday morning, they want to feel assured that the Lord's Table is a safe place to gather. As one communion supply manufacturer noted, "We always tell people our product is aseptically prepared, meaning it's not touched by human hands during the process. It's completely automated."¹

When Jesus told Peter and John, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover," they didn't have to worry about whether the bread and cup were double-sealed. They didn't have to place a hand sanitizing station at the entrance to the upper room. They didn't have to make sure seats at the table were six feet apart, and that all the disciples arrived wearing a mask. Remembering how God had brought his people out of Egypt wouldn't have to feel so antiseptic.

If our current church guidelines had been in place, there's no way Jesus would have been allowed to take one cup and pass it around to the disciples, to share with one another. That's way too risky. Better to play it safe and have Peter and John prefill some tiny cups, each with its own wafer. It may look and taste a lot more skimpy, but at least Jesus and his followers won't end up in the headlines: "Local Outbreak Traced to Passover Gathering in Upper Room."

"After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, 'Take this and divide it among you'" (v. 17). One of the distinctive things about Luke's account is that during the course of the gathering Jesus gives two cups. This could reflect the fact that some prescriptions of the Passover meal required four cups of wine. Or it could be related to a wider cultural practice of serving a ceremonial drink marking the transition between the supper and the conversation that followed. Whatever the specifics in this particular situation, Jesus takes the first cup and tells the disciples to divide it among themselves. In other words, to pass it among themselves. To share it among themselves. To distribute it among themselves.

Jesus couples these instructions with a focus on the future. "For I tell you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (v. 18). Jesus vows that this meal which has been a celebration of Israel's deliverance in the past will point toward the future fulfillment of God's saving work. This will be a meal of hope, anticipating the completion of the redemption that God is accomplishing through Christ.

¹ Adelle M. Banks, "This Is My Body, Prepackaged for You." Christianity Today website. March 12, 2020. Accessed July 29, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/march/communion-coronavirus-prepackaged-wine-wafers.html>>.

As we live by faith toward that day, and rely upon the promise of our Lord, we continue to do what his disciples did with him there at the table. What he has taken, and blessed, and given, we receive and distribute. We share it among ourselves. That's one of the downsides of celebrating the Lord's Supper during COVID-19. By having you pick up your prepackaged communion kit as you enter the sanctuary, we miss that portion of the observance where I give the bread and cup to the deacons, who then give these to you, and you give them to one another. That act of distribution, so familiar yet so significant, gets removed from our experience of worship. We don't have as much of a sense of passing Christ's gifts among ourselves.

And yet that's an essential part of our congregational culture. That act of receiving what Christ has given and distributing it among ourselves isn't just a method for serving the Lord's Supper; It's also a pattern for our life together. We're constantly taking the blessed things that Christ hands us and sharing them with one another in the church.

We take the gift of time and share that with one another. We take the gifts of financial and material resources and share those with one another. We take the gift of experience and share that with one another. We take the gifts of talents and skills and share those with one another. We take the gift of food and share that with one another (Think about how much we miss our fellowship meals during this time.).

We also take the gift of power and share that with one another, partly through distributing authority among the congregation. J. R. Briggs, who works with a lot of pastors and church leaders, often asks them if they would pass the Bread Truck Test. In other words, "if the senior leader of the church was hit by a bread truck and died, what would happen to the church? Would the church fold because everything depends upon the leader at the top or are people already empowered to lead and confident to step up and lead in his or her absence?"¹ How we share this gift of power is a reflection of how we take the gift of ministry and share that with one another. We take the gift of Christ himself, all the ways that he is present to us and with us, and share his presence with one another, through worship, work, and witness.

So our church, like every congregation, is in the business of distribution. And not just distribution among ourselves, but distribution beyond ourselves. True, what Jesus does by taking, blessing, and giving the bread and the cup is presented to his followers, the church. But the gift of redemption, accomplished in and through him, isn't meant for just those who are already within the church. Christ gives himself for the world, and works through his church to distribute the gift of redemption to the world.

In the life of the early church, worship, particularly what we now call communion or the Lord's Supper, was often built around a fellowship meal. Within the context of this fellowship meal, the early Christians would share together the bread and the cup of the Lord's Supper. One of the most interesting accounts of this practice comes from a church leader named Justin Martyr. In one of his writings, dated around the middle of the second century, Justin describes the Sunday meeting of Christians in the city of Rome. Part of his account reads as follows:

And, as we said before, when we have concluded the prayer, bread is set out to eat, together with wine and water. The presider likewise offers up prayer and thanksgiving, as much as he can, and the people sing out their assent saying the amen. There is a distribution of the things over which thanks have been said and each person participates, and these things are sent by the deacons to those who are not present. Those who are prosperous and who desire to do so, give what they wish, according to each one's own choice, and the collection is deposited with the presider. He aids orphans and widows, those who are in want through

disease or through another cause, those who are in prison, and foreigners who are sojourning here.²

Notice how Justin's account highlights the connection between the service of communion and service to others. Once the church had concluded its worship and fellowship, the deacons were responsible for taking the bread and the cup to those who couldn't be present. If someone couldn't come to the table of the Lord, the Lord's Table came to them. In addition, an offering was received, to be distributed among the poor and others in need. What's so striking about Justin's account is that the service of communion and service to others were both of a piece. They were inseparable parts of life in the community of Christ's people.

Whatever Christ hands you here today, give him thanks for it, and ask him to show you how you can distribute his gifts into the lives of others beyond our gathering. That may mean a deacon taking the Lord's Supper to someone who can't be here with us. It may mean giving financially or materially to aid someone who's job has been eliminated and whose family is struggling to get by. It may mean offering some other kind of support to weary medical workers. It may mean praying for a single parent who's trying to figure out how they're going to do their own job while also helping their children with virtual learning. It may mean speaking to someone, offering a verbal witness, about the hope you have through Christ in the midst of uncertain times like these. In whatever ways Christ says, "Here, take this and share it among yourselves," make sure you also take it with you and distribute it into the world.

I spoke a few minutes ago about the Bread Truck Test recommended by J. R. Briggs. He has another metaphor that can help us as a congregation understand who we are and why we're here. He says that churches need to empower their people to live as pipes, not buckets. According to Briggs, "Distributed churches have a strong, clear and robust plumbing theology. What flows into a bucket, of course, stays in a bucket; but what flows into a pipe flows out of a pipe. We talk often at our church about embracing our call to be pipes, not buckets—that what flows to us is something we, in turn, pass on to others."³

Here we are with our aseptically prepared, prepackaged communion kits. It's important that we make the return to church as safe as possible. But while we're so focused on getting people back into church, we don't want to lose sight of getting the church into the lives of people. Toward that end, may Grace Baptist Church always be a pipe, not a bucket. May we gratefully receive what Christ gives us, share it among ourselves, and distribute it to others.

¹ J. R. Briggs, "Becoming a Distributed Church: Why It's Worth the Shift." Fresh Expressions website. March 23, 2020. Accessed July 30, 2020 <<https://freshexpressionsus.org/2020/03/23/becoming-a-distributed-church-why-its-worth-the-shift/#:~:text=Distributed%20churches%20empower%20their%20people%20to%20live%20as,into%20a%20pipe%20flows%20out%20of%20a%20pipe>>.

² Quoted in Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 2.

³ Briggs, "Becoming a Distributed Church."