

A Package from Home

1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Matthew 26:17-19, 26-30

[Note: As you can see below, the idea for this sermon came from a message by the late Rev. John Claypool, and I want to credit him fully.]

[Note: We use a projection system during worship. Throughout this sermon you'll see the notes we use to communicate with the media team.]

Receiving packages in the mail is always exciting. ***[slide: image of a UPS or US postal worker at someone's door with a package]*** It's especially nice to get a package from home. I remember that vividly from my college days. From time to time my mom would send me a package. It didn't really matter what was in it—maybe some cookies, or nuts, or a new pair of socks. If I were really lucky, my dad placed a check in the package! But regardless of the contents, it was always thrilling to receive a package from home. Many years later I enjoyed sending packages to my own children when they were in college. They often remarked how much they enjoyed receiving them.

Most of us would agree that receiving a package from home is a wonderful event. Why? Because it's a tangible, concrete reminder that even though we are separated from our loved ones, they still love us and remember us. Thus, a package from home is a special thing indeed. ***[end slide]***

Years ago I heard a man named John Claypool give a sermon on Holy Communion. In the sermon, he mentioned that he had been reading from the journal of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. ***[slide: photo of Bonhoeffer]*** During his reading he came to a passage where Bonhoeffer talked about a package from home, and how much it meant to him. And then, in a beautiful way, Bonhoeffer related that event to the Lord's Supper. John Claypool's sermon spoke to me deeply and has profoundly impacted the way I think about the sacrament of Holy Communion. So today, with John Claypool's help, I want to share with you Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of Holy Communion as a "package from home."

First, let me tell you just a bit about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a brilliant young German pastor and teacher who opposed Adolph Hitler's policies in the 1930s. He became more and more vocal and opposed to Hitler, and finally, on April 5, 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested and put in prison. After two years in prison he was finally executed by the Nazis, hanged on the gallows just days before the Allies swept in to liberate Germany. Some of his correspondence from those two years was preserved and published in a profound book, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

About ten weeks after he had been arrested, he ended a letter he had written to his parents with these words: ***[slide: "It is Monday, and I was just sitting down to a dinner of turnips and potatoes when a parcel you sent me by Ruth arrived. Such things give me greater joy than I can say. Although I am utterly convinced that nothing can break the bonds between us, I seem to need some outward token or sign to reassure me. In this way, material things become the vehicles of spiritual realities. I suppose it is rather like the felt need in our religion for sacraments."]***

You see, Bonhoeffer knew that his parents loved him. Yet his heart was still hungry for that love to be reaffirmed. He needed to be reminded in a tangible way that they loved him. That's a basic human need. People need to know they are well loved. We all crave reassurance that someone cares for us, that we count, that we matter. ***[end slide]***

When my son Jonathan was little, I used to take him down to the baseball field to play baseball on Saturday mornings. One Saturday, after we arrived at the baseball field, I said, "Jonathan, I love you." He said, "I know. Let's play baseball." A while later I said, "Jonathan, I love you so much." He sort of grunted, "Uh-huh." About fifteen minutes later I said once again, "Jonathan, I really love you." Finally, Jonathan said, "Papa, why do you keep telling me that?" I said, "Oh, I don't know. I guess I need to say it, and I think you need to hear it. But if it bothers you, I'll quit. Do you want me to stop?" Jonathan thought a moment and then with a sheepish grin on his face said, "No, I like it." Well, we like it, don't we. And we never stop liking it. From infants to senior adults, we like to know that we are loved. To this day my wife of thirty-three years often leaves small pieces of paper on my desk with her lip prints on it. When I receive one of these gifts, I always smile and remember that I am a loved man. Although I know my wife loves me, I still enjoy the tangible reminder.

So how does all this relate to the Lord's Supper? Remember, Bonhoeffer was writing about a package from home and how it served as a reminder of his parents' love. And then he related it to the sacrament of Holy Communion. He said, in effect, that the Lord's Supper is a package from home, from our heavenly home. This bread and this wine are reminders of God's love for us—tangible, physical reminders. Bonhoeffer's package from home concept is a beautiful understanding of the Lord's Supper. It's also good theology. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he gave his disciples bread and said, **[slide: (photo of Lord's Supper elements) "This is my body which is broken for you, do this in remembrance of me."]**

The Lord's Supper is a concrete reminder that Jesus was crucified, his body was broken, and his blood was spilled. And why? To prove God's love for us. Romans 5:8 says, **[slide: (same photo of communion elements but change the caption to) "God demonstrated his love for us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us."]** The Supper says, "Do this in remembrance of me, in remembrance of my great love for you."

The older I get, the more important this sacrament becomes to me. I have come to a point where I need to be reminded in a real, tangible way that I belong to God, that God loves me, that I'm still a child of Jesus Christ. And so taking this Supper never grows old for me, and I can never do it too often. Indeed, it grows more special all the time. This bread and cup truly are gifts from home, to be celebrated with joy. Holy Communion tells us that we still belong to God, that we are well-loved people. Because of that, the Lord's Supper provides us spiritual sustenance for the living of our lives. That's why it's called a sacrament. God's grace is imparted to us in a powerful and mysterious way when we partake of this holy meal.

And so, for the third time, I said, "Jonathan, I really love you." "Why do you keep telling me that you love me?" asked Jonathan. I said, "Oh, I don't know. I guess I need to say it, and I think you need to hear it. But if it bothers you, I'll quit. Do you want me to stop?" "No," he said, "I like it. I like it."

[Note: Right before serving Communion, I said, "Come brothers and sisters in Christ. Let us partake. A package from home has arrived. Let us eat and drink and, in so doing, be reminded of God's awesome love for his children."]

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