

Throughout the ages, children have pretended their toys were alive. In 1995, Pixar Studios used that childhood fantasy as the theme for a movie. It was titled Toy Story, and told the tale of a group of living toys. But the toys weren't just alive. They possessed special powers that their engineering should not have allowed: like carrying out rescue missions for other toys that had gotten lost. As children eventually come to realize, however, the premise of that movie is - of course - false. Toys do not have life, power, or special abilities. They are inanimate objects.

When it comes to communion, Christians can be tempted to act in a way that is similar to how children act with their toys, treating the inanimate objects of bread and juice as if they possess life, power, and special abilities - particularly to save us from sin. But the bread and juice we receive in communion do not have the power to save us. They remain bread and juice no matter who prays over them, in what cathedral they are received, or what we may want to believe about them. That is because bread and juice are not living things, and they are most certainly not saving things - at least in and of themselves. They are symbols. Symbols of Jesus. Symbols of Jesus' love for us. Symbols of how Jesus alone has the power to save us through His love.

We see this in the book of Ephesians when Paul reminds us how relationship with God comes about. For we were once "*dead in our transgressions and sins*" Paul says. Then God acted "*because of his great love,*" and "*made us alive with Christ.*" So there is no confusion as to how this happens, however, Paul then declares "*it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works.*" The phrase "*by grace you have been saved*" eventually became the rally cry of the Protestant Reformation, clawing back from the Roman Catholic Church (among other things) the idea that the elements of bread and wine have saving power of their own, as well as the equally wrong idea that we are therefore saved as we (as a work of righteousness) partake of the elements of communion.

As Methodists, we stand in the Reformation tradition, believing that we are saved "*by grace through faith,*" and not by the power of the inanimate objects of bread and juice in communion. To grasp why we Methodists therefore still then talk about communion as a "saving sacrament," we need to understand what it means to be saved "*by grace through faith,*" how God uses the inanimate objects of bread and juice in the salvation process, and how we should therefore approach the sacrament of communion in our desire to be saved. To begin that journey of understanding, we need to look at the concept of symbols.

A symbol is an object (or image) that points to - or represents - something else. For instance, the collar tab of my clerical shirt is a symbol that points to my ordination. The steeple on top of our church is a symbol that points to the fact that this is a religious building. And the cross on top of that steeple is a symbol that points to the fact that this religious building is intended as a place to worship Jesus. In the same way, the bread and juice of communion are symbols that point to something else: Jesus, His love for us, and the fact that His love alone is what saves us.

To process what God intends the symbols of bread and juice to do as part of the process of us being saved "*by grace through faith,*" it might help to think about how a symbol like a stop sign works.

A stop sign has no power in and of itself. It can't make anyone stop. [The way people so often fail to stop at intersections is proof of that fact.] Its power to influence a person's behavior therefore comes from that to which it points. In the case of a stop sign it is a law which says that if you don't stop at an intersection where that symbol sits, a police officer can write you a ticket. So while symbols do have a kind of power, their power comes from that to which they point.

When it comes to communion, God operates through the symbols of bread and juice in a similar way. This is because those elements also have no power of their own. Any ability they possess to help us be saved comes from that to which they point: the loving grace of God. As such the symbols of bread and juice point to the fact that we were "*dead in our transgressions and sins.*" They point to the fact that God acted "*because of his great love for us*" to make us "*alive with Christ.*" And so there is no confusion about how the process of salvation happens, they point to the fact that we are saved by "*grace through faith.*"

We see this spoken to in chapter 11 of Paul's letter to the Corinthians when he addressed how they were behaving when they gathered for worship, reprimanding them for having strayed from what he had taught them. For what they were now doing when they gathered for worship, and particularly in the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the midst of worship, was making a mockery of the process of salvation. So, Paul wrote, "*I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good,*" for "*when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you.*" And as a result of those divisions, Paul said that "*when you come together, it is not [therefore] the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk.*"

In lifting up such behavior, Paul was trying to help them to see that instead of "*two or three*" gathering in Jesus' name in worship to be the Body of Christ, they were actually dishonoring God by "*despising the church*" through which God seeks to save the world. Which is why Paul then wrote the words we know from the communion liturgy as a corrective "*for I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.'* [And] *in the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'*"

This is because the essence of what Paul "*passed on*" to the Corinthians was (according to his words here in chapter 11) the teaching that "*whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*" "*The Lord's death*" is Paul's shorthand phrase for Jesus having died on the cross, as the image and idea of Jesus dying on the cross is a symbol. This is because while Jesus dying on the cross is a historical event, Paul was not referring to it in that way when he wrote to the Corinthians. He was using it as a symbol to point to something else: how Jesus (and Jesus alone) has the power to save us through His love.

This is because there was no objective change in the fabric of the universe that happened when Jesus died on the cross. There was no cosmic switch that was flipped that automatically led to people

being saved. There was no galaxy ledger magically erased of human transgression against God. What happened when Jesus died on the cross is that He painted a picture, an image, a symbol, of not only how much God loves each and every one of us, but also that God alone has the power to save us through His love (for Jesus was then raised from the dead and given the authority to raise up all who would have faith in Him).

This is why when the repentant crowd at Pentecost asked Peter “*what shall we do?*” he replied “*Repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the GIFT of the Holy Spirit.*” The GIFT of the Holy Spirit. Not the earned result of having done a work of righteousness, but the GIFT of the Holy Spirit, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit the GIFT of salvation itself.

Which brings us back to the phrase “*by grace through faith*” that became the rally cry of the Protestant Reformation and the Methodist movement. For we cannot save ourselves. And there is nothing in the elements of bread and juice that magically changes our sinful nature. But the bread and cup are nevertheless symbols God uses to save us. And He uses those symbols by inviting us to look where they point (to the fact God loves us, to the fact that it is only through God’s love that we are saved, and to the fact that God invites us “*in faith*” to receive His saving grace anew each time we obey His words to receive bread and juice “*in remembrance of Me.*”

To help my confirmation kids grasp what we’re talking about, I invite them to imagine someone has come to their house with a gift. “*What do you have to do to receive the gift?*” I ask. “*Open the door,*” they all reply. “*Is that all you need to do?*” I ask. After they ponder my question, one of them usually says “*You have to reach out and take the gift.*” “*Is that all?*” I ask. Then another chimes in “*You have to open the gift.*” “*Is that all you have to do?*” I ask a final time. Finally, one of them says “*You have to use the gift.*” “*Exactly,*” I say, “*in order to benefit from the gift, you have to receive it, you have to take hold of it, and you have to use it.*”

Then I invite them to imagine going to school the next day. “*You’re excited about the gift,*” I say, “*so you tell your friends about it. But instead of telling them about the wonderful person who gave you the gift, or how great the gift is, you brag of terrific a job you did answering the door, the stupendous a job you did opening the gift, and the fantastic way you used the gift.*” Then I ask them “*What would your friends think about your bragging?*” At least one kid gets it, and says “*they’d think you’re an idiot.*” “*Why is that?*” I ask. “*Because you’re bragging about doing something that wasn’t important. What was important was that some person gave you a gift, and that the gift they gave you was terrific.*” And that’s when I explain that this is what it means to say that we are “*saved by grace through faith.*”

Having faith is not a work of righteousness. It is merely saying “Yes” to God’s offer of forgiveness and restoration to relationship. For God will not force us to be in relationship with Him. God will not coerce us into letting Him heal our sinful hearts. And God will not impel us to allow His Holy Spirit to change us from the inside out. But, if we are willing to believe that God wills - through the power of His grace - to save us, and if we are willing to have faith that things like prayer, Bible

study, and worship, fellowship, giving and service, as well as (and even more importantly) the symbolic elements of bread and juice, are the means of grace through which God will save us as He promised, then receiving the elements of communion “*in remembrance*” of Jesus, opens up the door of salvation to us, and allows God to move beyond showering us with prevenient grace, to offering us justifying grace, and then transforming us through sanctifying grace into what Peter calls “*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,*” so we might “*declare the praises of him who called [us] out of darkness into His wonderful light,*” now and each day we continue to have faith.

This means that the answer to the first question in our summer sermon series, Do The Sacraments Save Us From Sin?, is NO. It is God alone who saves us from sin. But God chooses to save us from sin by “*grace through faith.*” And one of the means of grace He invites us to exercise faith in is the sacrament of communion. For when we - in faith - receive the elements of bread and juice (in “*remembrance*” of the saving love of God that was displayed in Jesus’ death on the cross) God gives us not just abundant life but eternal life, and not just earthly power but heavenly power, and not just special human abilities but the divine abilities we call spiritual gifts. Let us, then, prepare our hearts this morning to receive such things anew as we tell God once again that we are willing to be saved “*by grace through faith.*”