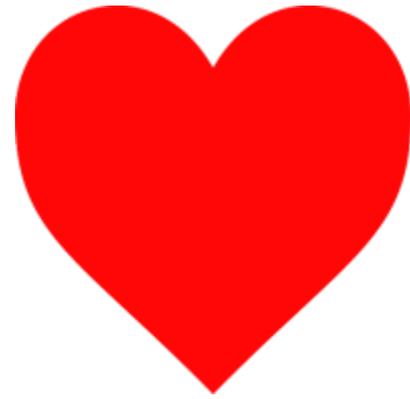


Symbols and Communion
A Message for Trinity Evangelical Free Church
Presented on Sunday, August 1, 2020

Introduction

Today, I'd like to talk about symbols.

We are surrounded by symbols. What is a symbol? A symbol is an image, a picture of something. It's usually simple. The simple image gets associated with other things. Often, those other things are complex.



Let's take for example, the classic image of the heart that we see on Valentine's day. It's simple.

It's red. It's symmetrical. We could say that this symbol is a little odd, because it doesn't really look like a heart. We've all seen the textbook image or a real heart. The two don't really have a lot in common.

We don't know who created the classic heart symbol or when they did it. We only know that this symbol is normally associated with love. Love can be complex - It's not always easy to understand. So, it's nice to have a simple place to start.

A symbol is a simple image that helps us to think about something complex.

The Power of Symbols

Now, here's an important thing about the heart symbol. If I were to print this out and give it to someone, does that mean they have to love me? Does it force someone to love me or obligate them to love me? No, of course not. It doesn't force anyone to do anything. However, that doesn't mean it has no power. ***Its power lies in how it's interpreted by people.***

Let's build on this. Let's say a young lady meets a young man. She finds the young man desirable. Later, the young lady receives a card with a picture of a heart on it from the young man. We're on to the start of something special.

On the other hand, let's say the young lady meets a young man and she has no interest in him. She receives a card from him with a heart on it. What happens then? If she's kind, she explains to the young man the next time she sees him that she's not interested. If she's less than kind, the young man may receive some abuse.

So, the power of the symbol lies in how it's interpreted.

Users of symbols

There are people in the world who know the power of symbols. They're called advertisers.



Here's a good example: These are the golden arches of McDonalds. Note: Not yellow arches, but golden arches.

The folks at McDonalds started years ago with a simple symbol. A stylized letter "M". They started by making sure everyone knew that this was associated with food. So, they came up with a slogan: "Look for the Golden arches."

This worked for a while. Later though, it wasn't sufficient to just associate the arches with food. In 1971, McDonalds created the slogan "You deserve a break today."

This has three parts: First, "You deserve". You're special. You're valuable. Then we get the second part. Because you're special and valuable, you deserve a break. Life is hard, isn't it? You deserve a break. When should you get that break? "You deserve a break **today**." So, give in to that impulse to stop by the local McDonalds.

Are you getting hungry yet? Oh, there's more.

What does it mean when someone thinks you're special? What does it mean that someone values you? They care about you. **It means they love you.** In 2000, McDonald's introduced the slogan, "we love to make you smile." In 2003 that changed to "I'm lovin' it." Then in 2015 the slogan became, "Choose lovin'."

Now, I'm happy for anyone who runs a successful business and creates jobs for people. However, there's a little problem here. **Do you think the people at McDonalds love you?** Do you think they really care about you? If you do, I have some land in Florida to sell to you.

This is all phony. When advertisers come up with these symbols and these slogans, they basically say anything they think will make people buy a product. There is no greater motivator for humans than love, so advertisers do all they can to make you feel loved when you buy their products.

This is a shame, because there is someone out there who really loves you. You know who it is - God. Unlike McDonalds and other companies, God has nothing to sell you. He only wants to give things to you. He also understands the power of symbols. How does he know that?

The Creator of Symbols

13 For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it very well.

SLIDE

when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16 Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them. (Psalm 139:13-16)

God is our creator, our maker. And he's good at what he does. He didn't just slap some random parts together. The writer here says, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." We're told that we are "intricately woven". Not only are we wonderfully made, but our lives have been planned out by our loving creator. "...the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them."

So, God knows everything about us, because he made us. Among the many things he knows, he knows that we respond to symbols. So, he has created many of them for us.

Let's look at some of the most important.

Sacrifices for sin

Way back in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve rebelled against God. The first thing they do is try to cover up their sin by making garments of leaves.

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked;
so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (Genesis 3:7)

Adam and Eve knew they just made a mess, but they didn't realize the nature of it or how big it was. So, they just grabbed some leaves, thinking this would solve the problem. This was the start of a bad habit that has plagued humans since the beginning. We don't realize the nature of our sin. We don't realize how serious it is. So we think we can easily make up for it or cover it up. In this case, cover up.

God looks at this and says, "not good enough". Here's what he did:

The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.
(Genesis 3:21)

There's an important principle here. In order to get leaves from a tree, the tree suffers very little damage. Leaves grow back. In order to get skin from an animal, something much more serious has to happen. The animal has to die. If you take leaves off a tree, it's hard to notice. But when an animal dies, we notice that. It's ugly and violent - just like sin. Sin is ugly and violent and much more.

So, Adam and Eve needed to learn an important principle:

For the wages of sin is death... (Romans 6:23)

Where there is sin, something must die. Animal skins became a symbol of this principle.

Later, when Moses gave the Law, this principle was symbolized in detail. The people of Israel were introduced to the idea of a sacrifice for sin. The greatest of these sacrifices happened on a day called, "The Day of Atonement". You can read about it in Leviticus 16. On this day, one animal was to be sacrificed for this sin of all the people. It was a very solemn day. This was a very important sacrifice.

There was just one problem. These were symbols. Remember, symbols don't do anything. It's how people interpret them. It's what they mean. King David understood this:

16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
17 My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart
you, God, will not despise. (Psalm 51:16-17)

Later in the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews explained this principle in full:

1 The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. 2 Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. 3 But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. 4 It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.
(Hebrews 10:1-4)

So, all of the sacrifices that were given prior to the coming of Christ were symbols. Symbols alone don't do anything. "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." (Hebrews 10:4)

But, one day, God would provide something that would take away sin.

5 Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:
"Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
6 with burnt offerings and sin offerings
you were not pleased.
7 Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—
I have come to do your will, my God.'" (Hebrews 10:5-7)

Sin has a price: Death. Something has to die to take away sins. But, as we just learned, the sacrifice of animals isn't enough. The human race needs an ultimate sacrifice. That's why Jesus came.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he knew this:

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

Jesus willingly offered himself as the final sacrifice that would take away the sin of the world. Anyone who accepts this sacrifice is saved from their sin.

All of this brings us to a special event in churches. God knows that we respond to symbols. So, Jesus gave us two of the most important symbols in the Bible. They are both part of an event we call "communion".

Let's look at the summary of these symbols given to us by the Apostle Paul.

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 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." 25 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." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (I Corinthians 11:23-26)

Bread and Grape Juice. These were common in Jesus' day. They were known to anyone living in the Mediterranean region of the world. They're common today. When they're used for communion, we call them the "elements".

Why do we eat bread and drink the juice?

Verse 24: Bread – “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Verse 25: cup – “Do this in remembrance of me.”

Not, “Do this because it saves you”. Not “Do this because it maintains your salvation.”

These are symbols. Just like all the other symbols in the Bible, they don’t do anything. The power of symbols lies in what they mean to us. In this case, Jesus wanted these symbols to make us remember some things.

Bread

In order to eat bread, you have to break it. You have to bite it. If bread were alive, it would be hurt when we ate it. It would be hurt a lot.

Jesus allowed himself to feel a great deal of pain on the way to the cross.

- He was beaten.
- He was whipped.
- He had long thorns driven into his skin.

He also allowed himself to experience emotional pain.

- He was rejected.
- He was mocked.
- He was lied about.

All these things allow Jesus to relate to us. They allow him to understand us. There is no pain that you have felt or that you will ever feel that Jesus has not felt.

The juice

Juice has some things in common with bread. In order to get juice out of a grape, you have to crush it. The grape has to die for us to get juice. Because most grape juice is red, it’s a symbol of blood. When we lose blood, we die. So, blood is a symbol of death. Jesus wants us to remember that he died for us.

26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:26)

When we take the time to remember, we proclaim. Why do we need to do that? We proclaim because all the people of the world need to know what Jesus has done for them. Because people relate to symbols, these symbols help people to understand.

Some thoughts

Why are we taking the time from our regular schedule to discuss this? Over the last few months, I've given this topic a lot of thought. The topic of communion came up just after our churches were all shut down for the Coronavirus. Some churches are fortunate because they could easily produce live, online services through the Internet. One online church announced that they were going to have communion online. Since people at home don't always have pita bread and grape juice, participants were told to grab whatever they had on hand. Since the elements of communion are symbols, they said, it doesn't matter that you don't have bread products or grape juice. Grab some crackers. Grab some chips. Grab some beverage - any kind will do.

I don't like to spend a lot of time criticizing other churches, but somehow this didn't feel right.

After some prayer and reading, I came up with the following principles to remember when we observe communion at our church.

1) This was given to us by our Lord.

I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, (I Corinthians 11:23)

This was given to us directly from our Lord, Jesus Christ. So, it's important. It's nothing trivial.

How important is it?

2) People who did it incorrectly were getting hurt.

27 So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. 29 For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. (I Corinthians 11:27-30)

This is important. Paul tells us that participants in communion need to “examine themselves” (v 28). They need to “discern the body of Christ” (v 29). So, communion is for Christians who understand the importance of what he did for us. Participating in communion without doing these things results in “judgement”.

3) Communion is not a “means of grace”

There is a phrase used by theologians: “Means of Grace” That means, some people think that there are actions that we must do that are required in order to God’s grace to be active in our lives - Without those actions, our salvation is in doubt. So, if you don’t do things like partake in communion, you can’t be fully saved. Or your salvation is held up somehow.

We don’t believe that.

At one point in his ministry, the apostle Paul was in prison. A great miracle occurred while he was there.

Here was the result:

29 The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.
30 He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” 31
They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” (Acts 16:29-31)

Recall, humans have a problem that has gone on since Adam and Eve grabbed some leaves in the garden. We think sin is small. So we think that dealing with it is small. It’s tempting to believe that actions like drinking a little juice or eating a little bread cover our sin.

But sin is a terrible problem. Jesus had to die to take away our sin. Our response is to believe in what Jesus was willing to do for us. To be saved, you must believe.

- Not believe and be baptized.
- Not believe and participate in communion.
- Not believe and go out and to a lot of good things.

The list goes on. ***You must believe.***

Communion is not a “means of grace”.

Can you substitute?

This brings up a question. Sometimes people go the other way. The bread was likely unleavened bread, the type required for Passover. The “cup” was probably wine or grape juice. Good people disagree over the alcoholic content of the wine.

Because our Lord used common elements, and because these are purely symbolic, some have asked if other items can be substituted. Can you use corn chips and Coke? As you know, things go better with Coke. Seriously though, is your state of mind the only matter of importance when you partake?

We'll talk in a bit about what people do during times of extreme challenge. For now, because of the importance of Communion, we try to stay as close as we can to the original items specified by our Lord. That keeps it special.

4) *The Lord himself handed out the elements.*

Jesus was the "Master". This event took place under his supervision. He handed the elements to future leaders of the Church. They, in turn have overseen this act in the centuries following. Because of this, many churches schedule communion as a public event, overseen by recognized leaders of the church.

5) *Jesus didn't give specific details on some things.*

He gave no specific time interval. He didn't say, "Do this every day", or "Do this every week", or anything else. Because of this, there is disagreement among good people as to the timing of Communion. Some do it weekly. In our tradition, do it monthly. Some think it's so special that it should only be done once a year.

Other Considerations

Historically, the Church has faced questions and challenges. Good people have disagreed on exactly how to face those challenges. Here are a few:

Means of Grace (revisited)

Let's talk more about this concept, "Means of Grace" As we said, communion is not a means of grace. For us that means missing it doesn't affect your eternal state. You're saved whether you participate or not. ***I believe that a proper understanding of this is vital.*** Communion is considered a "work" by some. So, if a person is relying on this "work" and others like it (church attendance or other activities) for their salvation, they're in danger. Let's see what Paul had to say about things like this:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse! (Galatians 1:8-9)

I sometimes get concerned. Let's say someone is in the hospital, and there is concern for how long they will live. They can't physically come to church. It's not unusual for others to suggest that the pastor visit them and "administer" communion. A Catholic priest would do that right away, because Catholics believe Communion affects salvation.

The problem here is a question of what the sick person is thinking. They may have spent a lifetime in an evangelical church saying that Communion isn't required for salvation. But do they really believe it? Taking communion to them may be an invitation to rely on a lack of faith for their eternal salvation. In my view, that's dangerous. In this case, I would rather encourage the sick person to rest in the knowledge that they may soon be in the hands of their loving Savior. They can rest in his powerful work on the Cross on their behalf.

Tough Situations

Let's consider another, and a different example. Suppose some Christians live in a country where they experience heavy persecution. Large, public meetings are dangerous. So, they meet in small groups in secret. Here, an "ordained" person isn't available. Because we are instructed to take communion as an important event on our faith journey, I believe it would be permissible for these people to take communion without one. If regular bread or wine aren't available, they could use whatever makes sense. I would only instruct such people to hold Communion on some regular schedule, making sure they properly reflect about it, and prepare for it.

My recommendations for the current crisis

So, what does this mean for us today? And in particular, what does it mean for us in a time of crisis? Not just in our nation, but all over the world, Christian churches have been forced to close their doors. Even when we've reopened, not everyone can return. And, at any moment, we may all be closed down again.

We believe that church attendance is important. However, we may not be able to do it consistently. So, we're doing the best we can with what is hopefully a temporary situation. No one will lose their salvation because they're not coming to a church building. When the crisis is over, we'll resume public meetings in our building where everyone can attend.

In the same way, because the crisis is surely temporary, during the closure we held off on Communion. No one will lose their salvation because they missed the event a few times. It's that much more special now that we have started again.

Should the crisis continue, we will need to give heavy thought and prayer to alternatives. Communion is important, and although it's not a means of grace, it's important in our spiritual journey. So, we'll cross each bridge as we come to it. I've said on several occasions that if

someone can't come to church for health reasons, I don't mind taking communion to them as long as they understand it's not a means of grace.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

So, our God, our creator, has made us in such a way that we respond to symbols. We are surrounded by people who understand this, and they use symbols to make us think that care about us. Fortunately, we know that God does. He's given us important symbols. Two of the most important are the elements of communion, the bread and juice.

When we partake, we need to understand that, although these are not a means of grace, they're still very important. They need to be treated with respect. Communion should only be approached by people who understand salvation in Jesus Christ, and who have examined their hearts.

Before we close, here's one more thought: We mentioned the young girl who gets a card with a symbol on it - A heart. If she desires the young man who sent it, good things may happen. If she does not desire the sender, sad things happen.

We have been given the symbols of Communion by someone who loves us deeply. He has given these symbols so that we can remember the things he's done for us.

Whenever we prepare our hearts for communion, let's remember what's at its core:
-The love of our Savior for us.