



# KALAMAZOO FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## Sermons

The Cup of Salvation

Psalm 116:1-13; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

July 9, 2017- Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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Paul is writing to the Corinthians. A church he knew well seemed to know many of the members of the congregation individually, and therefore, seemed to have a correspondence where he knew what was happening at the church. He writes to them these words:

"For I received from the Lord what I also handed onto you. That the Lord Jesus, on the night that he was betrayed, took a loaf of bread. And when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, he took the cup, also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as oft as you drink it in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.'"

For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us, for the Word of God within us, Thanks be to God.

In the production of Les Mis that I saw, we got to the part where the students, who were planning the revolution against the current French Regime, were gathering in a tavern, planning their hopes to build a barricade that would stop the soldiers. But they knew that it was going to be a very dangerous, and probably futile, exercise. The scene, however, is one of them seated around a table, and there are probably about a dozen of them lifting their cups, holding together their words of encouragement, and it's very clearly designed to give us the thought of DaVinci's Last Supper scene. Today we're going to celebrate communion, a sacrament in our denomination, one of the two sacraments. Seth taught very eloquently about baptism last week, and the symbolism of

the water that we use to baptize and the understanding that we get from that sacrament. Today, we're going to share communion. And I'd like to talk about an aspect, the dimension of symbolism, that we share that isn't often recognized. We Presbyterians think that sacraments are visible signs of an invisible entity, or experience, that we have. The sacrament of the baptism and the sacrament of communion, we're experiencing that relationship with God. It's something that we can't physically show, but we show it through this experience. I kind of connect it with a kiss between two lovers. The kiss is a physical thing. But we're showing that emotional connection that the two people are sharing. When we're talking about communion symbols, the bread is easy. The bread is that substance that is the basic part of our daily life – what we need to continue life. And when we share it together, what we share together is the basic part of what makes us human, what makes us human together. Then, we look at the cup, and we so often think of what's in the cup – That grape juice, or perhaps wine in some congregations. And even for Saint Paul, for Paul who was writing to Corinthians, only 60 years after Jesus, that sense of the wine in the cup had already started to take on the understanding or symbolism of Christ's sacrificial blood, and that the entrance into his sacrificial love and work. But we've lost the understanding of the cup. It's the cup. Jesus was not talking about what was in the cup; Jesus was talking about the cup. In Psalm 1:16, we hear about the Cup of Salvation, that the psalmist is talking about as his sign of his presence in the love and community of Christ. His salvation has come about, and now he's giving back his thanks, and expresses it by saying, "I take up the cup of salvation." The truth is, in the Old Testament, there are two cups. The Cup of Wrath, which I suspect you've heard of more often – that cup which God pours out on those with whom he is unhappy. And this is not an individual experience, usually; It's a community, a national experience. So, the Cup of Wrath becomes an experience of a group of people, a nation of people who experience the difficulties that they may have perceived as being God coming down on them, but I think was more often the

consequence of their own behaviors and actions. At any rate, that opposed to the Cup of Salvation.

The Cup of Salvation. There are a couple of names for the Cup in the Old Testament. The Cup of Blessing is another word for it. But the Cup of Blessing is that opposite of the Cup of Wrath. It is God's benevolence, God's love, God's graciousness, God's binding power for those who follow Him and serve Him. You may remember some other ways that the Cup gets used or worked into the language of the Old Testament. In the 23rd Psalm, "My cup runneth over." This is God's benevolence coming into human existence. Jesus, when he's in the Garden of Gethsemane, asks God if He might be able to remove that Cup of his impending crucifixion. Cup, the future. The community. Again, when Jesus was with James and John, and they were asking, "How can we be important in your coming Kingdom?" And Jesus says to them, "Can you drink of the cup that I share. In other words, can you handle what I am going to experience and what I'm going to ask you to live out?"

The Cup is a symbol of our shared life together. Just like those students in Les Mis, there's recognizing that their lives are bound together, and dangerously so at this point. What Jesus was expressing his disciples in the Last Supper was the fact that our lives are in a new covenant, a new relationship, one of community, one of being together. Our mission is the same from now on. When we partake of the cup in communion here, we are those disciples. We are putting ourselves into that community, into that shared life. In First Corinthians, Paul is reminding Christians at Corinth of the power of the communion symbol. You see, he had heard through his friends that in Corinth they were having the supper. It was kind of for recognition of our potlucks. Everyone would bring some food to share, and they would have a meal together, but it involved these communion symbols. And what had happened in Corinth is that the wealthy people in the congregation would get there early, with their rich foods, their good foods. The slaves and the servants, who had obligations to their masters and to their households, might arrive much later. The wealthy people, the ones who could get there

early, were eating up the good food. And the leftovers were left for those who came later. And Paul admonishes them that this is not the way we share communion. This is not the way we share the Christian life.

Presbyterian Communion... I bet a bunch of you remember-- Well, not remember. It's this congregation, because in a lot of congregations, they still pass these trays down the pew, right? You've been there with it and where they've done that? When I was in seminary, of course, that was the way everyone did it. So, we were trained. "This is what this means when you're passing the tray down the pew." Presbyterians -- John Calvin, way back to him -- didn't want the ministers to be symbols. They didn't want them to be priests. This was an anti-Roman Catholic thing, I'm sure. They didn't want them to look like priests. So they didn't want them to be put up there in the front, serving the communion to everybody. He wanted the elders to do it. And not only the elders, but he wanted to put it into the hands of everyone in the pew, who would then, as ministers of Jesus Christ, serve it to their neighbor. And in passing it down the pew, we were often trained to say, "This is the Bread of Life. This is the Cup of Salvation." So, I wanted to remind us of that symbolism and that understanding that we are each Jesus Christ to each other. That we are each called not only to consume the Cup and Bread, but to share it with each other. That we are being called into a very special community in Jesus Christ in that love, sharing that experience, and that future. It is an outward sign of our invisible solidarity with God and with each other. We still share the bread and the cup and recognized Jesus' sacrifice. What is essential in our lives, what will be at the center in sustaining purpose, is that we share together. In Christ's life, in Christ's future, in Christ's mission, we are the people of God. Amen.