

People loved by God,

Doesn't it seem strange to hear the Bible say that when you eat and drink the Lord's Supper "*you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again*"? Does that make sense? Paul seems to be saying that when we eat and drink the Lord's Supper we are talking—talking even with our mouths full. After all, you have to talk in order to proclaim, don't you? If I tell you to proclaim the Lord's death, you'd probably think I want you to go somewhere and speak to people about Jesus. So you might rightly ask me, ask Paul, or even ask Jesus how we can proclaim Christ with our mouths full of bread and wine or juice?

To answer that, you should remember that sacraments are signs and seals of God's promises to us.

A seal—in our culture—is an official imprint on a document. I have my college and seminary diplomas in my office. They are signed by the school president as well as the president of the board. But in between the signatures is a seal. Someone could possibly forge a signature, just copy the original and make it look official. But a seal on a legal document makes it that much more official. A seal is usually the emblem of the company or school and it's pressed into the paper, usually making tiny holes that show a logo that is specific to that institution or business. No one else has a seal like that.

In Bible times, a seal was often the signet ring of the king. A document was written that would be sent as the official command or promise of the king. The document was rolled up and then hot wax was dripped on to the end of the roll and the king pushed his signet ring into the wax. And that marked it as a promise from no one other than the royal who was the only one with that ring.

The sealed document, however, meant that whatever was promised in that document was irrevocable. It was guaranteed! The king was giving his word. So when we talk about the Lord's Supper being a sign and seal, the seal means it's guaranteed.

Jesus says, "This cup [we drink] is the new covenant in my blood." The word "covenant" refers to a binding promise.

Marriage, for example, is a covenant. Marriage is a legal contract on paper but much more than that it is a trusting relationship. It's about promises and faithfulness that will strengthen the bond of love between a wife and husband.

In our relationship as God's people with God, the covenant promises are sealed and confirmed whenever we drink the cup and eat the bread of the Lord's

table. He we testify that God has promised us, "I will be your God." And we have promised him in response, "And we will be your people." Our Lord Jesus says to us in the Lord's Supper, "Here is a reminder of my promise! I've died to make you right with God. I've given my life for you. My promise stands! I've sealed the deal for you through my death and resurrection!"

So seals guarantee the promise. And signs tell us certain things without using words. That's the whole purpose of signs. Think about it.

If you are driving in the car with someone and you spot one of those things in the middle of an intersection with a big red dot, a yellow dot and green dot, what is that? A stoplight? How do you know that? Does it shout out to cars, "Stop!!" Or does it scream, "Slow down"? What about "Get going now"? No, it doesn't do any of those things, does it? It just changes colour and each colour of the light proclaims a different message to you without speaking a word.

Have you ever seen this symbol before? (Skeleton) Where would you see this kind of sign? Maybe in a chemical or fertilizer store? What does a skeleton with crossbones through it mean? Poison. It doesn't say poison. But it means poison. Someone at some time told you that and now when you see that symbol it says to you "This container has poisonous material in it. Be careful!" The picture tells you that "if you swallow, lick or even, in some cases, inhale the chemical you could become very sick or die."

Tonight, some of you are going to watch the Grey Cup. In football you see all sorts of signs and you don't need to hear anything. When you see the sign, you know what it means if you're a football fan. When the referee puts both his arms straight up, what does that mean? Touchdown!

What about the symbol with three arrows in the form of a triangle? It means recycle.

And when I just take out this flag for a second and wave it, it has a symbol on it too. But you know what the flag stands for, don't you?

In Colossians 2 Paul reminds us of the symbolism of both circumcision and baptism. The first, he says, is a symbol of putting off the sinful nature, not with human hands but by Christ. And the baptism is a sign of being buried with Christ and raised again through faith in the power of God who raised Jesus from the dead (vv. 11-12). Similarly, when we partake of the Lord's Supper we are saying that we believe in Jesus. We believe He died, giving His body and blood in our place so that we can live forever.

Sometimes signs are active. We act out certain rituals and those rituals mean something. The former president at Calvin Seminary is his book, *Beyond Doubt*, gives us some helpful insights into what it means to celebrate the sacraments. He writes,

Thomas Howard has pointed out that we often show how important something is to us by “acting it out.” We perform a ritual. We not only say something; we also do something that says something. (p.280)

Imagine coming to Canada from some part of the world where shaking another person’s hand is totally unknown. You might wonder about the ritual of two people approaching each other, extending their right hands, taking hold, and then pumping their locked hands up and down. What does that mean? Well, we all know that. It means “Hello” even if no words are spoken. On the other hand, after weddings and baptism, etc, people shake hands with the couple or the family. What is that all about? Again, with or without words, those handshakes mean “Congratulations!” And if you go to a funeral home to see a grieving family, your handshake means “I offer you my sympathy” even if you can’t say a word. And if you happened to drive through town and see two people discussing things vigorously in a salesman’s office at a car dealership, and then see them stand up and shake hands, you can be pretty sure that they have just reached an agreement of some kind. The handshake says, “It’s a deal!” (cf. p.280).

Rituals are an important part of the way we talk, sometimes with words and sometimes without.

Now some of the rituals we perform accompany events that keep on happening. In good winter humour, Canadians each February turn their eyes toward Wiarton in Ontario and Balzac in Alberta to find out from a groundhog if winter will be longer or shorter.

Other rituals point us to something that happened in the past. On the Monday of the May long weekend, for example, some communities light fireworks to honour our historical connection as a nation with the British monarchy. On July 1st we celebrate Canada Day remembering that we came into existence as a nation in 1867. On November 11th people lay wreaths at the local cenotaph to remember those who have given their lives in war to defend our freedom. Rituals like these remind us of important events in the history of our country. Their purpose is to help us remember what happened, lest we forget and take our national blessings for granted.

The Lord’s Supper has both an historical element as well as an ongoing reality. *“For whenever you eat the bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death,”* writes Paul. In the Lord’s Supper we remember the reality that Christ died for us, giving His body for us and shedding His blood in our place. That’s the historical side. This is what Jesus talked about when He said, *“Remember me whenever you do this.”*

But then there is also an ongoing aspect of the ritual when we take the bread and the cup of the Lord’s Supper. We are re-enacting the original event through symbols that point to the real thing: breaking bread and pouring wine.

And in doing so we say, “We are the people of these Christ-events and of all that they mean.”

So this morning we come together to proclaim in our eating and drinking that we believe in Jesus. We don't have to say anything. The very fact that we are here and partaking says it—without words.

The Lord's Supper then is not just a meal of commemoration. It is also a meal of confession. It's not just about remembering Jesus. It's about saying “He's my Jesus”! Or perhaps it's better stated the other way around, “I'm one with Him. I belong to Him, my faithful Saviour.” I'm not ashamed to partake of the body and blood of the Lord represented in these elements because I believe Jesus is the only one who could pay for my sins and He has done that in my place.

In some sense partaking of the Lord's Supper is proclaiming in our actions just as Paul did with words in Romans 1:16,

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes....”

It is our way of not only calling Him Lord but showing others that He is in fact “my Lord.” That is why Paul says in partaking we “*proclaim the Lord's death.*” In partaking we are not only saying that Jesus died for our sins but that He is Lord, now in heaven ruling over all things. He is the one who we look to for direction—to direct our lives. We look to Him for blessing—life lived His way is the pathway to blessing. He's a good Lord who we know will not steer us wrong! And because we know that we often steer ourselves wrong, we look to our Lord for grace—grace to help us live closely to Him, live His way which is the way of blessing.

It is grace which He supplies to us in many different ways. But it is, we confess, given to us in this sacred meal. Just as regular food strengthens our bodies for the journey ahead, so God uses this spiritual food to symbolize that He is present with us and to strengthen us for our journey as Christians in this world until we go to be with Him or He comes again.

And that's why Paul also adds that we do this until the Lord comes again. This too is a reminder of what we believe when we come to the Lord's Table, namely, that He will return from Heaven. Jesus is our Lord. He is in heaven now and He will come back from there. And then we will eat and drink with Him in the heavenly kingdom for eternity.

That's what we are proclaiming when we eat and drink this meal. So maybe we should think about inviting people to come to worship, especially on Sundays when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Yes, we'll tell everyone that this is a meal for believers. It's our Lord meeting with us and strengthening us. But this is where we each proclaim Christ.

I read, "It may seem strange to invite guests to a ritual event that needs so much explanation. But we do it with other events. In sports, for example, we are often eager to initiate prospective fans to the complex rituals of football, or tennis, or softball.

One advantage of inviting guests to the Lord's Supper is that when they ask their inevitable questions about it, we find ourselves talking about all the basics: we explain how Jesus' body and blood, sacrificed on the cross, offer us salvation. Our God is a nourishing God. The church receives this nourishment in gratitude. We long for the feast of the coming kingdom.

This beautiful sacrament sums up the entire gospel in a simple set of gestures and actions. Thanks be to God for this beautiful visual sermon we all get to preach!

So let us come now with gladness and faith to proclaim our Lord's death as we celebrate this holy meal on this wonderful Lord's Day.

And all God's people say, Amen