



# Marks of a Methodist

## Week 4: Sacraments

Brian Mattson - 08/02/2026

In a week, I'm going to play a role in a murder mystery dinner at a three day wedding celebration. I'm not going to be playing just *any* role that night. I will be Detective Basil Graves leading the guests on the journey to discover just who is the killer among us. I'll be armed with a magnifying glass, candy cigarettes, a razor sharp eye for details, and impeccable wit, obviously. By the end of the evening, with the help of those assembled, I hope to be able to prove, beyond the shadow of a doubt, just exactly who the guilty person is.

Of course I will be getting a little help in this endeavor. We will *all* be trying to solve the mystery of who killed the beloved bridegroom on the eve of his wedding, and we each have a part to play to move the fun evening along. Of course, it will also help that I am getting a full script beforehand so I'll be able to direct the group towards the evidence we need to identify the culprit. To solve a mystery like this, we are definitely going to need evidence.

Nothing beats an old fashioned whodunnit, right? That's why detectives on the hunt and courtroom dramas have played out on TVs for decades. We just love it when we can solve the case with hard, indisputable evidence. Finding physical proof isn't always possible though. Many cases rely on verbal testimony or circumstantial evidence as attorneys argue their side in front of a judge and jury, attempting to persuade those listening.

One of my favorite courtroom dramas played out that way. The attorneys were making their cases, going back and forth. A case in which there was no evidence, just the testimony of the accused and the accusations of the prosecution. Then, in a dramatic twist at the end of the case, the defense attorney *was* able to produce physical evidence that proved to be the deciding factor. Nobody saw it coming, but right there, in front of the entire courtroom, real, hard proof was presented in a case in which there was none. Bag after bag, letter after letter, the United States Postal Service presented the evidence. Letters written directly to Santa Claus. You all remember that scene. The classic court case at the center of *Miracle on 34th Street* showed actual physical evidence for Kris Kringle's defense. The judge decided right then and there that if the USPS believed this man to be Santa Claus, then who was he to disagree. Case dismissed.

In that debate about belief, or a lack thereof, proof somehow showed up. In our modern world that demands proof, a life of faith seems impossible to provide evidence for. We have our own testimony, but is that enough? I can neither touch, taste, or smell God, nor can I hear or see God. These are the typical things we need to be able to prove something. A life of faith is not really concerned with the physical realities though. Still, things we can sink our fingers into or perceive with one or more of our senses goes a long way in making our case. God is none of those things. As Jesus proclaimed, "God is spirit," which is not an easy thing to define or prove, and for sure not visible, as we sing in the classic hymn:

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,*

The free gift of God, the cornerstone of John Wesley's Methodist Movement—grace—is another unseeable, unqualifiable thing. If you missed it our first week, we define grace this way: **The undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God in human existence through the ever-present Holy**

**Spirit.** In our Methodist tradition, we continue a long history of seeing the sacraments as physical manifestations of God's grace.

John Wesley simply defined sacraments as **an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace**. We have two in the United Methodist Church: baptism and Holy Communion. Our Catholic brothers and sisters observe five other sacraments—confirmation, penance, orders, matrimony, and anointing the sick—but Wesley held to the notion that Christ ordained only the two we observe.

So let's talk about our two sacraments today and how the United Methodist understanding of baptism and communion differ from other denominations. Here in Southwest Missouri, home to the Assemblies of God headquarters and a healthy amount of Southern Baptist and non-denominational churches, baptisms only count if the person is old enough to understand what they're doing—a believer's baptism—and they've gone completely underwater. This could mean a traditional baptistry hidden under the stage, a meeting out by the river, or dunked in a stock tank on stage. As much as I would like to dunk a few of you, we don't have a 300 gallon baptistry hidden under the drumset. Nor do I think that amount of water is necessary for God's grace to be present. I understand the symbolism of being completely immersed and the power of a public proclamation of faith, but I am as deeply moved by a family baptizing their infant with a sprinkling of water. Because our tradition understands the act of baptism as both a symbol *and* a promise. Baptisms mark the initiation into a covenant relationship with God, and adopted into a particular body of believers—a church family. We see the act as symbolism in the sense that the person is washed clean of sin, entering into a new life, but also in a very real way God has initiated the baptized to be participants in Jesus' ongoing work in this world. Baptism isn't a one time event, but a call to action in the life of faith.

Some denominations have a hard time understanding why we baptize infants and young children. While there is no specific mention in scripture

about babies being baptized, there are cases where entire households were. One could assume that an entire household would include children amongst the members of the family. Secondly, the Apostle Paul links the historic Jewish practice of circumcision of newborns with the later Christian tradition of baptism. So today, along with the Catholic church and many mainline denominations, we baptize infants, not as a choice the children make, but as an act of God's grace, God's initiation into the Church universal. We, Methodists, also see this as a physical manifestation of God's Prevenient Grace—evidence of God's invisible work that started long ago before we were aware of it.

So baptism remains a crucial step in our lives of faith. A moment when God's grace was made visible. A sign marking us as a child of God in Christ's church. And so we continue to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus commanded.

**Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.**

**- Matthew 28:19-20**

Our other sacrament is Communion, which we will celebrate today. You may know it by other names—the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist—and each of those names represent different aspects of this sacrament. Our denomination's official document does a good job describing them:

**"The Lord's Supper reminds us that Jesus Christ is the host and that we participate at Christ's invitation."** Jesus invites us to take part in the special meal he ate with his disciples the night before his crucifixion, and other meals he shared in homes and on hillsides.

**"Holy Communion invites us to focus on the self-giving of the Holy God which makes the sacrament an occasion of grace, and on the holiness of our communion with God and one another."**

**Finally, "Eucharist, from the Greek word for thanksgiving, reminds us that the sacrament is thanksgiving to God for the gifts of creation and salvation."**

We usually observe this sacrament on the first Sunday of each month, as well as Easter and Christmas Eve. John Wesley was a fan of taking communion as often as possible, not only because it was a direct command from Jesus—*Do this in remembrance of me*—but also because of the real benefits we receive.

**The grace of God given herein confirms to us the pardon of our sins, by enabling us to leave them. As our bodies are strengthened by bread and wine, so are our souls by these tokens of the body and blood of Christ. This is the food of our souls. This gives strength to perform our duty, and leads us on to perfection.**

**- John Wesley**

This meal is an opportunity to invisibly strengthen our souls, fortify our bodies, and renew our relationships. At its heart, this is a family meal, but one in which there are always more seats. In our United Methodist tradition, we practice an open table. An ecumenical table. There are no membership vows to profess. No Methodist tests to pass. This is a table set by Jesus and offered to any as a free gift of grace. Taking the bread and juice is also a dynamic action in the life of the believer. There's an invitation and a response. *When we receive the bread and wine so "we may be for the world the body of Christ redeemed by his blood," we are remembering. At the same time, we are also re-membered, put back together again. We pray that we may be "one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world." God's work of making us one and uniting us with Christ and with each other is the ordinary way by which God feeds us, sustains us, and empowers us to live as Christians in*

*the world.* United in Christ. One loaf, one body. A shared people with a shared purpose, instituted by Jesus himself.

**He said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.” Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves, for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”**

**- Luke 22:15-20**

These sacraments are not merely symbols or memorials. They represent our call to be partakers in Christ’s work in the world, right now. We recognize, in this mystery of faith, that God’s grace was always there, and we respond to it in baptism and communion. These invisible changes happen deep within us, unseen by human eyes, but we recognize the power of these physical, outward signs of water, bread, and juice, to be the very real evidence and presence of God’s grace for each of us right now. How that happens, I’m not totally sure. Neither was John Wesley. Here’s a paraphrased section he wrote about communion:

**I come then to God's altar, with a full persuasion that these words, *This is My body*, promise me more than a figure; that this holy banquet is not a bare memorial only, but may actually convey many blessings to me. Indeed, in what manner this is done, I know not; it is enough for me to admire. One thing I know, though, is that I was blind, but behold, I see... And thus His body and blood are everywhere, but especially at this Sacrament, a true**

**and real presence.**

**- John Wesley**

Water, bread, and juice alone do not impart grace, holiness, and salvation, but I, too, believe these are the ordinary ways God becomes real and present with us. The sacraments do not convey grace either magically or permanently, but they are powerful channels God has chosen to make grace available to us.

And as I get older, I'm learning to be okay with a little mystery in my life. I don't need to solve every problem or answer every question, as much as I feel like it might make my days easier. But maybe learning to live within that mystery is good for us, or at least it connects us to Christians who've had the same questions for generations. The Greek word used in the early church for sacrament is *mysterion*, usually translated mystery. It indicates that through sacraments, God discloses things that are beyond human capacity to know through reason alone. We might even say that sacraments are God's "show and tell," communicating with us in a way that we, in all our brokenness and limitations, can receive and experience God's grace.

So maybe our goal isn't to prove our faith beyond a reasonable doubt. It's not to collect all the evidence. Perhaps, instead, our goal is to share these moments and mysteries together. Like Jesus, I, too, have eagerly desired to share this meal with you, for it is a constant reminder that I'm not alone. That I have a family. That I have been grafted into the vine along with all of you. And though the work ahead is daunting and tiring, I will not be working alone. *WE* continue the work of Jesus together baptizing with water and sharing the bread and cup—very real signs of God's grace in this world.