**The Hungry Spirit**

**September 3-4, 2016**

 I am delighted to be here with you on this Labor Day weekend. It’s a time to celebrate the accomplishments of organized labor, to enjoy family time, and to worship together.

 So, let’s continue our worship with a prayer…

 Hear these words from Paul. He wrote them to the Church at Corinth, as he was trying to explain this moment of the Last Supper. I’m reading from The Message paraphrase. First Corinthians 11:23-28…

***23-26****Let me go over with you again exactly what goes on in the Lord’s Supper and why it is so centrally important. I received my instructions from the Master himself and passed them on to you. The Master, Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, took bread. Having given thanks, he broke it and said,*

*This is my body, broken for you.*

*Do this to remember me.*

*After supper, he did the same thing with the cup:*

*This cup is my blood, my new covenant with you.*

*Each time you drink this cup, remember me.*

*What you must solemnly realize is that every time you eat this bread and every time you drink this cup, you reenact in your words and actions the death of the Master. You will be drawn back to this meal again and again until the Master returns. You must never let familiarity breed contempt.*

***27-28****Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Master irreverently is like part of the crowd that jeered and spit on him at his death. Is that the kind of “remembrance” you want to be part of? Examine your motives, test your heart, come to this meal in holy awe.*

 *— 1 Corinthians 11:23-28 (MSG)*

 I want to talk about God’s grace with you today.

 God allowed his Son, his only Son, Jesus, to be tortured and murdered by humankind. We beat him and whipped him and spit on him and hit him, we made him carry his own instrument of death to the killing ground, and then we nailed him to that cross, set it upright in the ground, and watched as life slowly leaked out from his wounds and his pores. The death of Jesus was a gruesome, grisly thing. And when I think of how horrible it must have been for Jesus, I can’t help think how horrible it was for Jesus’ father. I’m a Dad. And it tears my heart out from the roots to think of something like that happening to my son… even more so, if I had the power to stop it.

 God had that power. But God knew that we would be lost from him forever if He didn’t open the door to heaven for us. And so, God gave up his Son, while his Son was still living on earth with us, and took Him to heaven, so that when we give up our lives here, we can go to heaven, too. I can only think that it must have been the **only** way. If there was another, wouldn’t God, the Father, the author of all goodness, have chosen to spare His Son Jesus?

 Well, I don’t know. God’s reasons are beyond me. And they are beyond you, too. But that’s how we came to have the blessing we call grace. God forgave us for all the awful stuff we did, and we still do. And God still forgives us. Forgiveness. Kirby spoke so beautifully about that last week. Forgiveness.

 That’s grace, where it came from. We don’t know what else to name it. It’s full of patience and tolerance and love and generosity and kindness. It lives in God’s heart and we get little glimpses of it in our daily lives if we are alert to it. That’s part of what we share with each other when we have our time of prayer.

 And it’s one of the things we relive when we share Holy Communion. As United Methodists, we understand Holy Communion, or Eucharist, as a sacrament. Through sacraments, God discloses things that are beyond our human capacity to know and understand. Sacraments are “God’s show and tell.” God uses tangible, material things as vehicles or instruments of grace: “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, and a means whereby we receive the same.”

 In some religious traditions, there is a belief that partaking of the juice and bread is eating actual flesh and blood of Jesus. UMC does not embrace the medieval doctrine of transubstantiation, though we do believe the elements, bread and wine, are means through which God works.

 We believe that Holy Communion is not restricted to any age or ability. No one will be turned away from the Table because of age, or mental, physical, developmental, or psychological capacity, or because of any other condition that might limit understanding or hinder receiving of the sacrament.

 Holy Communion is open to members of other United Methodist congregations and other traditions or denominations. We recognize that we are only one of the bodies that constitute the community of Christians. And despite our differences, all Christians are welcome at the Table of the Lord. So are those who are seeking faith, searching for God in their lives.

 I’d like to tell you a story about grace and Holy Communion. It is not my story. You may have heard it before. I heard it years ago and I don’t remember where it came from, but it has helped me to grasp in some small way the depth of love God must have for us.

 It so happened that there was a certain Professor of Religion named Dr. Wellmon, a studious man who taught at a small college in the western United States. Dr. Wellmon taught the required survey course in Christianity at this particular institution. Every student was required to take this course his or her freshman year, regardless of his or her major.

 Although Dr. Wellmon tried hard to communicate the essence of the gospel in his class, he found that most of his students looked upon the course as nothing but required drudgery. Despite his best efforts, most students refused to take Christianity seriously.

 This particular year, Dr. Wellmon had a special student named Steve. Steve was only a freshman, but was studying with the intent of going onto seminary and into Christian ministry. Steve was popular, he was well liked, and he was an imposing physical specimen.  He was now the starting center on the school football team, and was the best student in the professor's class. One day, Dr. Wellmon asked Steve to stay after class so he could talk with him.

 "How many push-ups can you do?"

 Steve said, "I do about 200 every night."

 "200? That's pretty good, Steve," Dr. Wellmon said.  "Do you think you could do 300?"

 Steve replied, "I don't know...  I've never done 300 at a time."

 "Do you think you could?" again asked Dr. Wellmon.

 "Well, I can try," said Steve.

 "Can you do 300 in sets of 10? I have a class project in mind and I need you to do about 300 push-ups in sets of ten for this to work.  Can you do it? I need you to tell me you can do it," said the professor.

 Steve said, "Well...I think I can...yeah, I can do it."

 Dr. Wellmon said, "Good.  I need you to do this on Friday.  Let me explain what I have in mind."

 Friday came and Steve got to class early and sat in the front of the room. When class started, the professor pulled out a big box of donuts.  Now, these weren't the normal kinds of donuts, they were Krispy Kremes, the extra fancy kind, with custard or jelly filling and that amazing frosting on top.  Everyone was pretty excited.

 It was Friday, the last class of the day, and they were going to get an early start on the weekend with a party in Dr. Wellmon's class. Dr. Wellmon went to the first girl in the first row and asked, "Cynthia, do you want to have one of these donuts?"

 Cynthia said, "Yes."

 Dr. Wellmon then turned to Steve and asked, "Steve, would you do ten push-ups so that Cynthia can have a donut?"

 "Sure." Steve jumped down from his desk to do a quick ten.   Then Steve again sat in his desk.  Dr. Wellmon put a donut on Cynthia's desk.

 Dr. Wellmon then went to Joe, the next person, and asked, "Joe, do you want a donut?"

 Joe said, "Yes."

 Dr. Wellmon asked, "Steve would you do ten push-ups so Joe can have a donut?"

 Steve did ten push-ups, Joe got a donut.  And so it went, down the first aisle, Steve did ten pushups for every person before they got their donut.

 Walking down the second aisle, Dr. Wellmon came to Scott.  Scott was on the basketball team, and in as good condition as Steve.  He was very popular and never lacking for female companionship.

 When the professor asked, "Scott do you want a donut?"

 Scott's reply was, "Well, can I do my own pushups?"

 Dr. Wellmon said, "No, Steve has to do them."

 Then Scott said, "Well, I don't want one then."

 Dr.  Wellmon shrugged and then turned to Steve and asked, "Steve, would you do ten pushups so Scott can have a donut he doesn't want?"

 With perfect obedience Steve started to do ten pushups.

 Scott said, "Hey, I said I didn't want one."

 Dr. Wellmon said, "Look, this is my classroom, my class, my desks, and these are my donuts. Just leave it on the desk if you don't want it." And he put a donut on Scott's desk.

 Now by this time, Steve had begun to slow down a little.  He just stayed on the floor between sets because it took too much effort to be getting up and down. You could start to see a little perspiration coming out around his brow.

 Dr. Wellmon started down the third row.  Now the students were beginning to get a little angry.  Dr. Wellmon asked Jenny,
"Jenny, do you want a donut?"

 Sternly, Jenny said, "No."

 Then Dr. Wellmon asked Steve, "Steve, would you do ten more push-ups so Jenny can have a donut that she doesn't want?"

 Steve did ten....Jenny got a donut.

 By now, a growing sense of uneasiness filled the room.  The students were beginning to say "No" and there were all these uneaten donuts on the desks.

 Steve also had to really put forth a lot of extra effort to get
these pushups done for each donut.  There began to be a small pool of sweat on the floor beneath his face, his arms and face were beginning to get red because of the physical effort involved.

 Dr. Wellmon asked Robert, who was the most vocal unbeliever in the class, to watch Steve do each push up to make sure he did the full ten pushups in a set because he couldn't bear to watch all of Steve's work for all of those uneaten donuts.  He sent Robert over to where Steve was so Robert could count the set and watch Steve closely.

 Dr. Wellmon started down the fourth row.  During his class,
however, some students from other classes had wandered in and sat down on the steps along the radiators that ran down the sides of the room.  When the professor realized this, he did a quick count and saw that now there were 34 students in the room.  He started to worry if Steve would be able to make it.

 Dr. Wellmon went on to the next person and the next and the next. Near the end of that row, Steve was really having a rough time.  He was taking a lot more time to complete each set.

 Steve asked Dr. Wellmon, "Do I have to make my nose touch on each one?"
 Dr. Wellmon thought for a moment, "Well, they're your pushups. You are in charge now. You can do them any way that you want."

 And Dr. Wellmon went on.

 A few moments later, Jason, a recent transfer student, came to the room and was about to come in when all the students yelled in one voice, "NO, don't come in. Stay out!"

 Jason didn't know what was going on.

 Steve picked up his head and said, "No, let him come."

 Professor Wellmon said, "You realize that if Jason comes in you will have to do ten pushups for him?"

 Steve said, "Yes, let him come in.  Give him a donut."

 Dr. Wellmon said, "Okay, Steve, I'll let you get Jason's out of the way right now.  Jason, do you want a donut?"

 Jason, new to the room, hardly knew what was going on. "Yes," he said, "give me a donut."

 "Steve, will you do ten push-ups so that Jason can have a donut?" Steve did ten pushups very slowly and with great effort.  Jason, bewildered, was handed a donut and sat down.

 Dr. Wellmon finished the fourth row, and then started on those visitors seated by the heaters.  Steve's arms were now shaking with each push-up in a struggle to lift himself against the force of gravity. By this time sweat was profusely dropping off of his face, there was no sound except his heavy breathing; there was not a dry eye in the room.

 The very last two students in the room were two young women, both cheerleaders, and very popular.  Dr. Wellmon went to Linda, the second to last, and asked, "Linda, do you want a doughnut?"

 Linda said, very sadly, "No, thank you."

 Professor Wellmon quietly asked, "Steve, would you do ten
push-ups so that Linda can have a donut she doesn't want?"

 Grunting from the effort, Steve did ten very slow pushups for Linda.

 Then Dr. Wellmon turned to the last girl, Susan. "Susan, do you want a donut?"

 Susan, with tears flowing down her face, began to cry.  "Dr.
Wellmon, why can't I help him?"

 Dr. Wellmon, with tears of his own, said, "No, Steve has to do it alone. I have given him this task and he is in charge of seeing that everyone has an opportunity for a donut whether they want it or not. When I decided to have a party this last day of class, I looked in my grade book.  Steve here is the only student with a perfect grade.  Everyone else has failed a test, skipped class, or offered me inferior work.  Steve told me that in football practice, when a player messes up, he must do push-ups.  I told Steve that none of you could come to my party unless he paid the price by doing your push ups.  He and I made a deal for your sakes."

 "Steve, would you do ten push-ups so Susan can have a donut?" As Steve very slowly finished his last pushup, with the understanding that he had accomplished all that was required of him, having done 350 pushups, his arms buckled beneath him and he fell to the floor.

 Dr. Wellmon turned to the room and said.  "And so it was, that our Savior, Jesus Christ, on the cross, cried to the Father, 'into thy hands I commend my spirit.'  With the understanding that He had done everything that was required of Him, He yielded up His life.  And like some of those in this room, many of us leave the gift on the desk, uneaten."

 Two students helped Steve up off the floor and to a seat, physically exhausted, but wearing a thin smile.

 "Well done, good and faithful servant," said the professor, adding, "Not all sermons are preached in words."

 Turning to his class, the professor said, "My wish is that you might understand and fully comprehend all the riches of grace and mercy that have been given to you through the sacrifice of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  He gave His Son, and He gave Him up for us all, for the whole Church, now and forever.  Whether or not we choose to accept His gift to us, the price has been paid."

 "Wouldn't you be foolish and ungrateful to leave it lying on the
desk?"

(end of story)

 In the center of every church I have ever been in there is a table, an unguarded door, a welcome pew and a place at the table. And everyone I know who has ever eaten at this table, who's ever been seated at this table, who's ever been pushed up against some stranger at this table, finds that there is something about that experience that affects every table and every meal. When we are the one body of Christ, when we are the church, we are fed by the Spirit. And that meal we share is a communion. Our practice of eating together as the body of Christ, as the one church, affects every table and every meal anywhere and everywhere in the world. Even meals of Krispy Kreme donuts. We ask for blessing. We take the loaf and cup. We eat. We are blessed by God’s grace.

 So many of us are in trouble. So many of us are hurting, beaten, destroyed, dark inside, hopeless. So often it feels as though every day is just going through the motions. There is no joy, no delight, no hope.

 People tell me how empty they feel and how purposeless their lives seem. And I am seized by this conviction: without Jesus I will always be lost. Without Jesus, I can never be the full and complete person that God crafted me to be. Without Jesus, I will never be able to fulfill the purpose for which God made me. Without Jesus, there will never be victory.

 But when I walk with Jesus, the road is easier. When I encounter roadblocks, He gives me the courage and the skill to overcome. When my body fails me and my mind deserts me, He takes me by the hand and leads me beside the still waters and restores my soul. When the world deals me death, He gives me life.

 That’s why I need Jesus. And it’s why you need Him, too.

 I don’t know where you are this morning, where you are standing on the road of life. I don’t know the defeats you’ve encountered this week, the hurts and the wounds you’ve received. I don’t know how your spirit is this very moment, but I know for a fact that Jesus is ready to take you by the hand today, to walk the path with you, and to take that awful burden from your shoulders and carry it for you for awhile. Right now, let Him lead you beside the still waters. Trust His rod and staff. Dine at His table. For when you choose Jesus, goodness and mercy shall follow you all the days of your life, and you will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Pray with me…