

**Sermon: "This is Life to You"**  
**Scripture: Corinthians 11:23-29**  
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How many of you remember the first time Communion was special for you? Do you remember when that was—the first time it finally clicked about what this meal meant? I was raised in a Christian home. My dad was a pastor, so I do not remember a time when I was not in church. And back when I was a child, the church received the sacrament of communion four times a year; that was all—the first Sunday of the new year, Maundy Thursday, the first Sunday in July and the first Sunday in October. I can remember all of the adults going to the altar rail and kneeling and receiving a piece of bread and a cup—all of them having something to eat that I was not allowed to participate in. At four years of age, I began to ask my mom and dad why I could not come and receive the 'snacks' during service. My mom and dad—in a great teaching moment—began to explain to me that as soon as I could tell them what I thought the meal meant in a way that was meaningful, then I would be welcome to receive the sacrament.

I remember being about seven years old when I finally was able to put the pieces together and share with them that this meal helped us to remember Jesus who lived and died for us. And when we received this meal by faith, a little piece of Jesus lives inside of us. I remember walking down the aisle of the church on my mother's hand and coming and kneeling at the altar rail as the bread was passed to me. She let me take one piece—I was not allowed to take more than one—just one, and then I ate the piece of bread and took a little cup with the juice. And I received the sacrament of communion for the very first time. I also remember that very afternoon—it was early October, the leaves had turned where I lived—and we were driving to my grandparents' house. And I remember the scene outside the car window as this thought came to me—that there was a little piece of Jesus living inside of me. As I began to grow in my faith, I figured out that that is what our faith is all about—it is allowing this little piece of Jesus to grow so much inside of us that the time will come when we will be identified more with Jesus than we are with ourselves so that everything that we say, everything that we do, everything that we are, is a reflection of the Jesus who lives inside of us.

When I grew a little older, I began to read the Scriptures more and this passage from first Corinthians chapter eleven was very troubling for me. I mean, after all, what does it mean to receive this meal in an "unworthy manner?" How should I examine myself so that I receive it in a worthy manner? Then I began to think about whenever I go forward to receive the meal, am I ever going to be worthy to receive this? Years later, I began to study what Paul was talking about in this passage. You see, Paul was the spiritual parent to the Corinthian church, and the people in the Corinthian church had been called away from some of the vilest, worst lifestyles that you could possibly imagine, and they had given their hearts to Jesus and were trying earnestly to follow him; but every once in a while, they would slide back into their former life. Paul would have to remind them that that was not to be the case when they came to communion.

Some of them would fast for days and days and days, and then they would come to communion like it was a smorgasbord and would kind of gorge themselves. Another group of them had an issue with alcohol and they would come to com-

munion where they served wine—not good Methodist grape juice, but wine—and they would drink entirely too much and things would get out of hand. What he was doing was admonishing them like a spiritual parent to only receive the meal in a worthy manner. It helped me to understand that kind of context, but it did not let me off the hook about the condition of my heart and the condition of my life when I came to the table of the Lord.

Sometimes we need to remember what a gift it is to receive the body and blood of Jesus. We need to understand that when we receive this gift by faith it unlocks the mercy of heaven and the entirety of the grace of God and makes it possible for us to be forgiven and to live life in an entirely different way when we receive this meal by faith. So all of us can remember the first time Communion was special to us—but can you remember the last time that it was special to you? Can you remember the time that you received it in your adult lives or later in your believing life and all of a sudden it took on a whole new meaning for you? I can.

In 2003, I was invited to be a part of a mission team that was going to go to the east African country of Uganda. I still remember getting off the plane in Uganda and driving the twenty miles from the airport in Entebbe, the capital city of Kampala. Every one of my senses was assaulted, and every one of my assumptions about life was put into question. I wish I could get the smell out of my mind—the combination of red dust and diesel exhaust and open air fish and meat markets and the smoke from a welder's gun and charcoal smoke and a few million people that have different hygiene habits than you or I do living on the equator. It kind of smelled like the whole country went camping and never came back. I was there for two reasons: I was there because the team that I was a part of had partnered with a pastor in a village and we were building an orphanage for 300 AIDS orphans. The orphanage was crucial in that part of Uganda because that country is missing two to three generations of adults who have died as a result of the AIDS pandemic.

I would pick up the English-speaking newspaper there and read the obituary page. Now when you read The Columbus Dispatch obituaries, you read of people in their sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties. When you read the paper in Uganda, they are in the teens, twenties and thirties, dying of AIDS. A whole generation of children is being raised that is trying to rule themselves. If there is not somebody there to help put some sense of normalcy in place, many of them get kidnapped and put into child soldier warfare, or they get sold into prostitution or some kind of slave trade. What we were trying to do was to create a safe place that would possibly redeem 300 children so that they might have somebody in their lives who could teach them about Jesus and that the day would come where someday they would have a little piece of Jesus living inside of them too.

Now those of you who know me know that I should never be seen with tools in my hands—it is a very dangerous thing—so the second reason I was on the trip was to train Ugandan pastors. These are people who did not have more than an eighth-grade education, and we had developed a ten-day course for them where we were going to cover all of the basics of what it meant to be a pastor in those ten days. It was more training than they would ever receive in their lives, and I was there to train these would-be pastors—at least that is what I thought. God had a different idea—God had me there for one guy. His name was Abdul, he was thirty, he was a Muslim and he was my driver.

It is very important to have a good driver who is trustworthy and true when you are traveling in that part of the world—because, you see, the Swahili word for big, white guy is 'muzungu' and I was the biggest 'muzungu' they had ever seen. There was no

hiding me anyplace we went, but Abdul was great. He would go into any village and immediately go to the leader of the village, introduce us and let them know we were safe. He would go before us when we were eating—telling us what we should eat and what we should not eat so we would not get sick. He would translate for us, he would guide us, he would protect us, he was with us every waking moment from six in the morning until ten at night—every day—and we paid him ten times the daily average for a Ugandan which was the equivalent of ten U.S. dollars a day. He was making great money.

Abdul was with me all the time when I was teaching. He would sit right there in front during every session—but he was a very quietly devout Muslim. When the time came for one of the five times of prayer, he would get up, go outside with his prayer rug, lay it out, bow toward Mecca and say his prayers, come right back in and sit right where I was teaching. He listened to me talk about the nature of Scripture, the nature of who Jesus is, he listened to me talk about pastoral care and how to prepare a sermon or a bible study or a baptism or communion. He was with me every waking hour—except when he was saying his prayers.

About three or four days into the trip, I came down the steps of the guest house where we were staying and I was met by the pastor of the church who was building the orphanage—his name was Robert. He was very upset, and I asked, “Robert, what is the matter?” He said, “It is my daughter—her name is Deborah and she is three and she has the malaria and I think she is going to die. In fact, we put her in the hospital last night.” And then he asked, “Would you pray for her?” The leader of our team was a nurse—a special care nurse from Pittsburgh—and she said absolutely.

We all loaded into the van and went down to the hospital—at least I think it was a hospital because I have been in barns that were cleaner. We crossed the open trench sewer that was in front of the building and stepped up into the hospital and walked in—and my world was rocked. I saw used needles and syringes and scalpels over on this table, and we went from room to room to the desperately sick and the dying. We went through the TB ward and the AIDS ward and the post-op ward; we went through the maternity ward where a woman was giving birth—right there in front of God and everybody—as we walked right through. We then went into the pediatrics ward, which was a ten-by-ten-foot mud brick room with a cement floor and a tin roof, and there were four little girls in there—all of them on black vinyl mats, one of them being held by her mother, and that was Deborah. Our nurse leader went up to her and said, “Do you mind if we pray for your daughter?”

I will never forget this mother offering her daughter as if she was offering her to God; and Nancy—our team leader—took this little girl in her arms and began to anoint her with oil in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and she invited us to gather around and lay hands on her. We all did; and because I was the biggest guy, I am always the last in line and was blocking the door—but my hands were on the people in front of me. As we were praying, I felt two hands on my shoulder. When we were done, I turned around, and it was Abdul—my Muslim driver. He asked, “Pastor Jeff, what are you doing?” I replied, “Well, in our faith, we believe that if somebody is sick we should call together believing people, and we should anoint that person with oil, lay hands on them and pray for them because the prayers of believing people are powerful and effective.” He looked at me, and he said, “Okay.” We turned around and went back up to the place where I was teaching. I was teaching about baptism that day—all day.

Two hours later, there was a commotion out in the courtyard, and I looked outside

as Pastor Robert—who made less than two U.S. dollars a day—was dancing around in the center of all his people holding up his cell phone up in the air (less than two dollars a day and yet he has a cell phone. I do not get it...); but he had a cell phone. He was dancing around and the drums started to play and the people began to dance in and out. It was the most amazing scene. I finally got his attention. I asked him, “Robert, what is going on?” He said, “My wife just called. Five minutes after we left our daughter’s room, her fever broke, and she is coming home from the hospital today.” And I said, “Whoa.....” I went back to teaching, and Abdul was right here. That night, he delivered me back to the guest house where we were staying at ten o’clock and said “I’ll see you in the morning.”

I came down the stairs the next morning at 6:00 AM, and Abdul was standing there distraught. I asked, “Abdul, what is the matter?” He said “It is my daughter. She is three. She has the malaria and I think she is going to die.” Then he said, “Would you pray for her the way you prayed for Pastor Robert’s daughter?” We said “Absolutely—let’s go to the hospital.” He said “No, no, no—it is too far.” It was then that we learned that we were paying him ten dollars a day, and he was leaving our place at ten o’clock at night driving an hour and a half home to check on his family, and then leaving early enough to be back at six in the morning because of the money he was making—we paid him more after that. Then we said, “Can we lay hands on you and anoint you and pray for your daughter?” And my Muslim driver said, “Yes.”

So we gathered around, Nancy anointed him with oil, we laid hands on him, we prayed for him, we prayed for the healing of his daughter, and we went to work. That day, I was teaching about communion—Abdul sat there the whole time listening to everything I said, and then took us back to the guest house that night. The next morning, I came downstairs and met a very excited Abdul. He was so far beside himself, he could have been twins. I asked him, “Abdul, how is your daughter?” He said, “Pastor Jeff, you would not believe it, but my wife told me that at the very moment that we prayed for her yesterday, my daughter’s fever broke, and she was healed, and she came home.” Then he said, “It is a miracle!” And I said to myself, “It certainly is!”

Later in the week, we went out to visit a church in the bush, and we drove fifty miles out in the middle of nowhere and met this group of people—some of whom had walked for eight hours to meet us for church that morning. As we pulled onto the property, the United Methodist Women were working in the kitchen—the kitchen with three palm trees, three steel pots, a goat and about a half dozen chickens. As we drove on the property, they slit the throat of the goat, and I was sitting on the platform of the church looking outside the kitchen as the women were working preparing the meal. Abdul was sitting next to me translating what was going on. He noticed what I was looking at, and he said, “Pastor Jeff, that is our lunch.” And I said, “I know.” As we walked through the food line that day, he said, “Take some of this, don’t take some of this, take some of this, don’t take some of this.” We became friends.

My last night in town, they wanted to have a graduation ceremony for all the people who had been in the pastor’s training, and we had about 250 people crammed in this little mud brick church that was built for seventy-five—it was the most amazing thing I had ever seen. They asked me if I would preach, and so I did. I am convinced that if I had read the book of Leviticus that night people would have come to Jesus anyway. (Some of you need to go home and read Leviticus.) I was preaching about the woman caught in adultery, and I told them three things: I said, number one, you are never too far gone to come back to God; number two, Jesus is willing to receive you back and forgive you; and number three, you can do that right now. And when

I gave the altar call, it was this amazing thing—on the cement floor, people began walking from the back on their knees. I watched as the Ugandan pastors that we had been training for two weeks began to do what we trained them to do. They would go to someone and say, “What can we pray for?” and they would lay hands on them as they were leading people to faith in Christ. They were anointing them for healing. After they were done, they said, “Pastor Jeff, there are some people who need to be baptized”. We baptized some people—but in the middle of praying, I looked to my left and I saw this tall Ugandan on his knees. And as I looked closer, it was Abdul, my Muslim driver, sitting at the knees of our translator as he laid hands on him and was praying for him. I thought to myself, “Well maybe this is like the states where people get prayed for for a lot of stuff.”

After we were done with that, they said “Pastor Jeff, will you serve us communion? You have taught us so much about communion”. I was willing to do that. Now many of you know that I believe that Coca-Cola is a sacramental drink, and that we should drink it as often as we should in remembrance of him. I now have proof—in this picture, I am holding up a bottle of Coke saying, “This is the blood of Christ, shed for you.” What a country! I consecrated the elements and gave the invitation—and I wish you could have seen that they came. I have never seen anything like it; I have never seen joy like that. In fact, that is one of the dichotomies of this whole trip for me because they do not have anything; but when it comes to the stuff of heaven and things of God, they are incredibly rich.

Then I came home where everything that we have that glitters is gold. I get to the church and I do not see that joy. It is like we all swallowed a collective lemon. But here they came, they were walking down the aisle, the drums started to play, they were dancing, they were singing, they were shouting praises to God, and I was serving communion to my brothers and sisters in Christ one at a time with incredible joy. We got to the end of the line and there was one person left—and it was Abdul, my Muslim driver. I was afraid he did not get it so I went up close to him and put my hand on his shoulder and whispered in his ear “Abdul, do you know what this meal means”? I will never forget—he took a step back, and his face lit up, and he said “Oh yes, Pastor Jeff. I believe that Jesus is true for I have seen him living in you and in these people, and tonight I ask him to live in me. Please give me this meal for it is life to me.” I will never receive the gift of communion the same way ever again.

The next day, I left the country, and somebody from our team gave Abdul a New Testament in the language of his people. He held the New Testament up and looked at us over the New Testament and looked into the eyes of the giver of the gift, and he said, “I will read this every day for the rest of my life, and I will teach this to my children.” Every once in a while, I still get e-mails from Abdul, my Christian brother. He asks me questions about what he is reading—by the way, he makes less than two dollars a day, but, thanks to Yahoo, he has e-mail. He will write me and ask me questions about what he is reading in the New Testament, or he will ask me when I am going to come back so that I can teach him more about Jesus and baptize his children. Today, as we receive this meal, will you remember this is life to you—and to me—and to Abdul?