

“TAKE, EAT,” A Sermon for World Communion Sunday delivered by the Reverend Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, October 4, 2020

This morning we gather with Christians around the world for communion. It is a time of unity for us as Christ’s disciples. But this sacred meal also underscores our differences. We do not all celebrate communion in the same way. Nor are we necessarily in sync in our interpretations and understandings of its significance and meaning. Finally, though we simultaneously celebrate communion this day, we are not *uniformly* welcoming to each other as we “take, eat” the bread and “take, drink” the cup. While some congregations like our own declare that *all* are welcome to the Lord’s Table, others quite differently say, *not so fast: you need to be a member of our church first and completely like-minded at that.*

Ironically, in the midst of any such differences, virtually every Christian church is in agreement as to how our sacred meal got started. Communion began in an upper room in Jerusalem where Jesus gathered his apostles for a last supper before he faced arrest and crucifixion. Some contend it was a ritual Passover meal, retelling the story of Jewish liberation from bondage and slavery in Pharaoh’s Egypt. More definitely we can say that Jesus’ upper room gathering took place during the Jewish Passover season when tens of thousands of Jews made an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the holy season for the Jews.

All four gospels mention the Last Supper. (*Mark 14:12-31; Matthew 26:17-30; Luke 22:7-38; John 13:1-17:26*) The Gospel of John even goes into rich detail about the many things which happened that night, including Jesus’ washing of his apostles’ feet. (*John 13:2-17*) Somewhat earlier in his gospel, as underscored by our morning gospel lesson, John also presents prophetic testimony from Jesus where he declares that “I am the living bread that came down from heaven” and that “those who eat of this bread...will live forever.” (*John 6:50*) But, surprisingly, John omits any description of Jesus instituting a ritual meal on that night. This leaves it to Mark, Matthew, and Luke to tell the story, preserving what Jesus said on that occasion.

Luke does the best job of it. Luke’s gospel is the most explicit in recording Jesus’ actual words, calling us to share in the bread and cup as symbols of his body and blood “in remembrance” of him. (*Luke 22:19*) Indeed, as Jesus says there, first offering the bread and, next, the cup: “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me... This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (*Luke 22:19-20*)

Among Christians, the Lord’s Supper or communion is universally regarded as a sacrament. Underscoring its holiness, no longer do any Christian churches—at least to my knowledge—combine it with a full, sit-down meal as Jesus initially did for the Last Supper and, later, as some of the apostles also did in the days of the fledgling church.

Perhaps that pairing of communion with a full meal made more sense when our Christian forebearers still worshiped in homes, rather than in church buildings as we did pre-Covid-19. From Apostle Paul's own correspondence to the Christians of Corinth we know that he began to actively discourage this combined meal practice. (*1 Corinthians 11:17-26*)

As he noted, the rich folks in attendance often did not want to share whatever food they had brought to the table with the poor who were joining them. By the time that the communion rite began at the end of the rest of the meal, there was already a divide between the haves and have-nots. As Paul noted and complained, this diminished the spirit of harmony and unity for the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper that should always prevail among Christ's disciples.

There are a lot of ways to define a sacrament. But I like to think of it as moment of sacred or holy mutual encounter between ourselves and God in which we experience the reality and presence of the divine with more depth and togetherness than possible in everyday ordinary life. Although for Roman Catholics there are seven different sacraments, most of our Protestant churches recognize just two--baptism and communion.

The very term *communion* which comes to lips of Christians with hardly a second thought discloses a lot about what happens when we come together for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Consider the many close word associations with communion that can help reveal its deeper meaning. A *commune*, for instance, is a group of people who come together to live and share everything intentionally, as we saw in the very earliest days of the church described in the Acts of the Apostles. (*Acts 2:42-46*) Likewise, if you think about it, a kind of temporary or transient commune emerges for us as Christians every time we share in the sacrament of communion. In those moments, gathered for the Lord's Supper, we are all for one and one for all, aren't we? And with God present in our unity.

Meanwhile, *to commune*, as in the verb, not only means to actively draw together as a community but also to speak and converse with one another aloud or to communicate in silent, unspoken ways, through feeling and intuition. During the sacrament of communion, we not only become a commune of believers, tightly bound in affection and spirit, but also commune or communicate with each other and with God. At the very same time, God can and does take the precious occasion of our gathering, honoring and remembering his son, to commune and communicate with us. That is why we so very often come away with a palpable sense of having shared the most intimate time with God.

Not surprisingly, theologians over the centuries have weighed in to offer what they believe should be our deeper understanding of what is going on at communion and through communion. Since the 13th century, Roman Catholic theologians, for example, have contended that through a miracle of transubstantiation or transformation of substances initiated by priestly prayer the bread and wine raised up at communion time become the

actual body and blood of Christ. However, three hundred years later in the 16th century, Martin Luther, originally a Roman Catholic Augustinian monk, took umbrage with this. He instead argued that Christ through the communion sacrament--in what can only be called a divine mystery all its own--is physically "in, with, and under" the bread and wine but without either of them becoming his actual body and blood. In fact, all Lutheran Churches embrace that interpretation to this day.

Nevertheless, other Protestant Reformers who arose on the scene during Luther's lifetime could not fully concur or go along with what became such firm Lutheran doctrine. For all that they appreciated Luther's challenge to the Catholic Church and its doctrine of transubstantiation, they were not so convinced that he had gone far enough in demystifying communion. Rejecting any claims that Jesus Christ was physically present at communion once the bread and cup were blessed, they asserted that Jesus was only spiritually present in the meal shared which, to their mind, was powerful enough. Based on the Bible and earliest teachings and traditions of the Christian Church, the Swiss Protestant Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli widely preached that the elements of the communion meal should be strictly regarded as symbols of the body and blood of Jesus. The purpose of the sacrament was to serve as a reverential meal of remembrance until Jesus Christ returns in power and glory to usher in the final consummation of God's kingdom.

Ultimately, these several different views of communion developed their own followings. Each also came to be so tightly, even ferociously, held that they served to profoundly divide Christ's church, not only separating Roman Catholic from Protestant but also Protestant from Protestant. The idea quickly grew up that if we do not exactly agree on the proper interpretation of the communion sacrament, we should not share in the same meal together at all. Membership in any given church soon came to hinge on whether the prospective newcomer was ready to subscribe to what was touted in each place as the right interpretation of communion.

Congregation, it was in reaction to this battle over communion doctrine and the sense of mutual exclusiveness it generated which gave rise to our own family of churches. There's also a love story involved.

In 19th century Germany, the King of Prussia, a Lutheran, took as his bride a member of the German Reformed Church. Rather than adopt her husband's Lutheranism, she chose to continue her Reformed Church ties. What this meant is that the couple could not really worship together, sharing communion as a married couple at the same time.

Why? Because their two different Protestant churches, Lutheran versus Reformed, couldn't agree about communion, holding their own doctrine to be the only possible right one.

A very annoyed Prussian king decided to fix the problem once and for all for his own kingdom. By royal decree, he ordered the merger and consolidation of the heretofore

separate Lutheran and Reformed Churches of his realm. The result was the creation of the Church of the Prussian Union. It also came to be called, the German Evangelical or German Evangelical Lutheran Church. This is not to be confused with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America today which is strictly Lutheran through and through.

Thanks to his royal command, Lutheran and Reformed Christians were suddenly compelled to commune together even if they did not see eye-to-eye on what exactly was happening in the communion meal. Adapting because they had no other choice, the newly merged German Evangelical Church chose to emphasize what people in the pews believed in common, whatever their heritage, rather than focusing on the different doctrines of communion that had once divided and separated them. Consequently, in the same communion service it was now possible to have worshippers personally affirming that Christ was physically present through the meal, while others perceived only his spiritual presence, or regarded the entire sacramental meal as no more but no less than a remembrance of Jesus Christ until his ultimate return.

Happily, critics notwithstanding, God didn't smite this new, inclusive church. To the contrary, this united church survived, thereafter offering living testimony that as Christians we *can* walk in diversity and unity at the same time, provided that we are mutually patient, respectful, and faithful. This merged church subsequently produced three of the most influential Protestant theologians of the 20th century, including Reinhold Niebuhr, a one-time Detroit pastor who went on to author the Serenity Prayer in which he calls upon God's guidance to help change the things we can, accept the things we can't, with "the wisdom to know the difference."

Our own congregation, founded by Prussian German immigrants on this spot in 1882, has carried on that merged communion tradition. Today, as we celebrate communion, we may not all be of the exact same mind as to what is happening in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. We may be differently inspired by the various interpretations of the communion sacrament that have grown up in the history of the Christian church. But we all remain mindful that Jesus wanted us to share in such a meal as this in order to feel closer to him and to be comforted and strengthened in our devotion to the way of life he showed us and called each of us to embrace

I personally believe that Christ abides as a spiritual presence among us every time we gather for our communion meal. Moreover, I trust that his spiritual presence reaches out to all who are celebrating communion with us this day, whether there are sitting within the four walls of this sanctuary or are participating in this morning's communion service at home via Facebook broadcast.

I know that in the midst of this Covid-19 crisis, there are some sticklers in both Roman Catholic and Protestant churches who insist that virtual worship isn't real worship at all and

that communion isn't communion unless directly administered from the hands of ordained ministers or elders in church and only in church. Yet these folks either forget or mythologize the early history of our Christian movement where greater pragmatism always ruled, so long as guided by a sincere and abiding faith.

Even in the Christian church's middle years, during the Protestant Reformation, the great Martin Luther counseled tolerance and flexibility. Not at all facetiously Luther once declared that in emergency situations where there was no water for baptism beer could work just as well. For all his convictions about the right way versus the wrong way to go about communion, Luther would undoubtedly recognize and endorse the need for certain liberties in the face of the kind of a communicable disease crisis which now besets us and that is not so different from the plagues confronted by Christians long ago.

God is not limited and bounded as men and women like us are. God can bless and do extraordinary things with whatever we as his children and servants have at our disposal to bring to him for ministry. From everything I understand from gospels of Jesus Christ, the last thing a just, loving, and responsive God would want is to see all or most of us deprived of the sacrament of communion and thereby excommunicated by circumstances which are beyond our individual control.

Whether we are near or far as worshipers this morning, physically or virtually present, we are all a part of the living body of Christ too—a commune or community of the faithful that transcends any differences and distance between us. Our transcendent community and communion are a testimony to the reach and power of God, which no one should slight, discount, or dismiss. The fact that we remain determined to worship and commune together despite all odds profoundly honors Jesus and glorifies God.

I think communion in this time of Covid-19 is akin to manna in the desert wilderness, which kept the Jewish people from starving. (*Exodus 16; Psalm 78:24*) The sacrament of communion and the fellowship with God and one another that it occasions is certainly essential spiritual nourishment for us, which dispels our loneliness and reminds that no matter what is happening in the mortal world around us, God is reaching out to us through Jesus in a saving way. Here or at home, let us enter into our communion meal with glad and joyful hearts and the confidence that God rejoices in seeing us spiritually nourished, renewed. **Amen.**