

St. Paul's Congregational Church
October 1, 2017; Exodus 20:1-20 – 22A
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today we celebrate, with our brothers and sisters all over the globe, World Communion Sunday. This observance began in 1936 in the Presbyterian Church and was adopted by the World Council of Churches in 1940. Since then, the celebration has grown into an international ecumenical celebration of Christian unity. It's a day when we mark the almost universal Christian practice of breaking bread with one another – and remembering the night of Jesus' betrayal – when Jesus instituted what we now call the Lord's Supper as a lasting remembrance. But it's also a time to remember we are part of something universal – in different languages, with different traditions and customs and in various forms of liturgy, we celebrate along with other churches, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

It's both a joyous and meaningful partaking in Jesus' sacred meal with his friends and a mind-opening exposure to different Christian traditions from around the world. Today we come together: churches who celebrate weekly, monthly, even quarterly all gather around the Table together. It's always special when we participate in the Sacrament, but I've come to see World Communion Sunday as extra special – we are joined with congregations around the globe in this incredible sacrament.

I remember a few years ago in Middlebury when a delegation of our people were on a mission trip in the poorest of the poor areas of the Dominican Republic on this particular day, and we realized that at the very moment we were partaking, they were too, thousands of miles away. It was a breathtaking moment indeed.

And today our Table is dressed with a tablecloth from Zambia – brought to me by a college student after she spent a summer on a medical mission trip there. The chalice is a twin of a chalice brought to South Africa by a group from Glen Ridge on their mission trip there. We are indeed connected to our brothers and sisters around the world.

And this chalice and its twin, the plate, and the pitcher were all made by my Dad, making them even more special: – a symbol that we are joined at the Table by the great communion of saints above who have nurtured us in our faith.

There are many different names for this sacrament: “Eucharist”, “communion”, “the love feast”, the “table of the Lord” or “the Lord's Supper”. And as varied as the titles are for what we do today – so will be the means by which our brothers and sisters come to the table and the kinds of bread and wine offered. And the understanding that people have of what they are doing.

Some will come forward and receive unleavened bread in the form of a wafer into their hands. They may or may not then sip from the cup – which may be wine – or grape juice – of even some other beverage in those places where grapes are unknown.

Others, will tear a piece of bread from a broken loaf – and then dip it into the common cup.

Still others as we do today, will remain seated in their pews and will have presliced bread and individual cups passed to them.

And then still others may do these things as part of a full meal – seated around a table in a sanctuary of God’s presence. Or in a church hall. Or at a home. Or a school building. On the top of a mountain. Or simply sitting in a circle in a hut or in a clearing in the midst of a jungle or forest or in the middle of sand and rock.

Some today will regard the bread and the wine – after the prayer of Institution is spoken – as being fully and actually the body and blood of Christ. Others will regard the entire sacrament as an important “memorial” – and see Jesus as being spiritually present but not believe that he becomes physically present in the elements.

Who is welcome at the Table? Some traditions will welcome only those persons who have made a public profession of their faith to the table – when I was growing up, only after the rite of confirmation were we allowed to receive communion. Other traditions will welcome very young children, even babies, to the table. Some will state all those baptized are welcome at the table. Some will insist that each person must belong to the denomination and the community where the sacrament is being observed – others will have a table open to “all those who love the Lord and desire to walk in his path.” Here I believe that when we say simply, “All are welcome” – we mean it.

Please think about your own experiences in receiving the sacrament of communion – I’m sure there will be a large variety of practices and understandings this day as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. But there’s one thing that will hopefully stand out amid all the differences of opinion and practice, and that is that all of us will consider what we are doing as important.

I’d never really thought about the universality of communion until I spent a summer doing my clinical study at a large Roman Catholic Diocesan hospital outside of Boston. There were 12 of us in the class – 6 men, 6 women. All of the men were Roman Catholic, fully professed brothers or seminarians heading toward priesthood. All of the women were heading toward protestant ordination. We were all invited to give the homily at the daily mass at the hospital and I thought that a great idea – doing my part toward ecumenical activity. That is, until we were told, matter of factly – that of course, we Protestants couldn’t receive the sacrament of communion. Well. Talk about arguments, differences of opinion. It was a remarkable time for all of us indeed. I consider it a gift actually because it solidified my own thoughts and feelings about the Sacrament – that it is God’s table, not our own.

It is God’s Table, not our own. Everything we do in worship, education, and serving is about God – not us. Is there one right way to worship, teach, and serve? Honestly, I can’t answer that – but what I do know is that we’re called into relationship with God and the mission of the church is only and always to foster that relationship – with God and each other.

The commonality of Christians around the world today gathering about God’s Table is something to celebrate. For all of us as Christians are trying to discern what does it mean to be Christ’s disciple at this time, in this place; and that leads us to the question of how are we responding to God’s call to us, as individuals and as church. It’s at the Table where we receive, take in, Christ’s presence – feeding us, nurturing us, giving us courage to go where Jesus calls us, giving us strength to deal with the joys and sorrows of our lives.

Receiving in the Sacrament of Communion is both a profound community experience and a deeply personal experience, isn't it. We gather around the Table as the Body of Christ to receive the Body of Christ – we serve each other. We receive the Bread and partake together, signifying our unity with one another and with all who eat at God's table this day, an even bigger community as we join with brothers and sisters around the world. And we partake of the cup when we are served, signifying our belief that God knows and loves each one of us individually, by name.

When I'm doing a teaching presentation for children about communion, I ask them, what is the first thing families do when they come together? And they usually answer, eat! They're right, aren't they. We talk about how families gather on special occasions, join together at the table which has been set for them, give thanks to God for providing the opportunity to be together and providing the food we eat - and share a meal.

And that's what we do as church – as a church family.

Profound times, sacred times happen when we meet each other at the table.

The last time we celebrated communion a couple weeks ago, something profound and sacred happened right here in this place. If you were here, you may have noticed a young woman come into the sanctuary very near the end of our service. She sat in the back pew, put her head down, and cried, actually sobbed, very quietly.

When I went to the back of the sanctuary I went over to her and put a hand on her shoulder – she reached out and pulled me over into a desperate hug, still crying. When she was able to speak, she told me that she lived close by and had just received a phone call about the death of a very close friend. She'd gone outside and just walked – she saw our doors were open and she felt drawn in. We didn't speak for a few minutes as the postlude was playing– just held onto each other in her grief – and then I asked her if she'd like communion. Oh yes, she said, her eyes dripping tears.

Bev and Irene were in the midst of clearing the table at that point and I brought back the chalice and a plate of bread – and we shared the Body and Blood of Christ. Her tears of gratitude flowed – it was one of the most powerful moments of a sense of the presence of Christ I've ever witnessed or experienced ever. And, friends, you were all a part of that even if you didn't realize what was happening in those moments – St. Paul's was a beacon of light and presence and hope in that moment – we were all joined in that sacred moment that comes to all of us as a gift from God.

The church around the world today is a family. We are the family of God – a family formed by our common desire to follow Jesus. We are the people of God, called together and given life, through Christ Jesus our Lord. We are ones who trust in Jesus, and, with all the apostles and the saints strive to follow him faithfully and to keep the special law he gave us – the commandment to love one another as he loved us.

Our communion is a mystic communion – one not limited by time or space – but realized wherever men and women and children have sought, and are seeking, and will yet seek to do God's will.

It is a mystic communion that comes to us a gift from God – the God who wills that we love with our whole heart, mind, strength, and soul, and that we love one another as we love ourselves. It is communion that is realized – one that is known deep inside of us – when in humility, and with gentleness, and with patience, we bear with one another in love and accept God's gifts with grateful and humble prayer.

God is with us. Christ is with us. And with all our brothers and sisters who call on his name today and every day. Imagine – all around the world – people eating and drinking what God has provided and each praying, as we will pray, that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Just imagine. The voices of our brothers and sisters lifting up together in prayer and praise – in a variety of languages, in cultures, in places – what a powerful image that brings. We are One in Christ.

Praise to our God – to Christ Jesus his son, our brother, who has called us here today and invites us to commune with him and with one another in love. May you feel that connection, that presence, that strength, that deep, deep love today as you partake and every day. So may it be. Amen.