

A Broken Body

World Communion Sunday ~ 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

October 1, 2017 ~ Welborne UMC

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In college, I received communion every week. One morning a week our campus ministry group would gather on the steps of the chancel of the university chapel. We were a ragged group as we sat on the floor, some of us up high, some down low, some sprawled out exhausted from an all-nighter. Our campus minister brought a loaf of bread, a bottle of juice, and a chalice. We shared joys and concerns, talking about what was going on in our lives, and then he offered a prayer over the bread and the cup, and we passed it around, serving one another bread, and extending the cup to dip the bread in. Week after week I took part in this ritual—and it began to form and shape me in ways that I did not understand. I hadn't yet studied about what communion meant, I didn't know how to say the prayers—but I knew this time was a joyful, significant time for me.

I am sure that many of you approach communion like that—it is a significant time, a holy time, a time when you feel close to God—but you are not always sure exactly what it means. And that makes sense, because in our tradition we understand that the two sacraments—baptism and communion—are means of grace. In other words, they are something we do through which we receive God's grace—and God's grace is usually pretty unexplainable—beyond words. And we aren't always sure we need it or we deserve it—so God's grace is often mysterious and surprising to us.

This morning we want to stop a moment and think about what communion does mean, and what we are doing as we participate in it. And this morning we do that as Christians all around the world are sharing communion today, on World Communion Sunday. In some places the bread looks different, the juice or wine tastes different, the method of receiving is different—but the meaning is the same. This is a sacrament that reminds us of our global unity as children of God.

Our scripture this morning from 1 Corinthians is one of the earliest documents written about the practice of Holy Communion, or the Lord's Supper as Paul calls it here, or the Eucharist. If the words are familiar to you, it is in part because they are said when we pray the Great Thanksgiving before receiving Holy Communion in our church—and in most churches. As we gather on this World Communion Sunday, this scripture reminds us of the power of the table to bring wholeness to our hearts, and all creation.

Paul begins by reminding us that this is a practice that comes from Christ, and a practice that was begun on the night that he was betrayed. If we think back to that night, we recall that not everyone gathered at the table was of one mind about Jesus. Not everyone saw him as Messiah. Judas, too, was at the table and received the bread and cup. This should remind us that the table is a place where we come as broken

people. The table is a place where people who do not agree with one another are all welcome to gather. The table is a place where God's grace is extended to everyone, not as a reward for practicing faith well, but as a practice which shapes us into more faithful people. This table, Paul reminds us, is a table where the broken are welcomed.

Paul also reminds us that when we do this, we are doing this in remembrance of Christ. In the Greek, this remembering is called anamnesis. It is not just a calling to mind of something in the past. Anamnesis is the kind of remembering that happens when, as a friend of mine wrote this week, "past, present, and future collapse in on each other." In our worship, when we proclaim, "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again," we are pointing to this kind of remembering. Holy communion is not just a remembering of this supper. It brings Christ to life again in our midst in the breaking of the bread. This first happened in the Bible on the road to Emmaus, on Easter afternoon, when Christ appeared to the disciples but they did not recognize them until he broke bread with them, and they were able to see clearly.

This kind of remembering is mysterious and difficult to understand—and when I encounter things like that, I find it usually means they are holy. One way I like to understand this is by thinking of Holy Communion as a bit like a traditional family meal that your family shares, perhaps at Thanksgiving or Christmas or Easter. If you are fortunate enough to be well connected through the generations, often there will be at this meal a recipe that was prepared first by someone who has died, like Grandma's biscuits, or Uncle John's roast. The food might even be served in the dish that Grandma or Uncle John used to serve it in. As the family sits around the table and shares that food, sometimes it is almost as if their loved one has come back to be in their midst, and the flavors and smells of the food mingle with the laughter and the memories.

This complex remembrance has enormous power to bring wholeness and new life to our broken body. As all are welcomed at the table, the bread and the cup become the real presence of Christ to meet us. In a season of our human life when we hear so much about what divides us, about the divisions not only in our own nation, but around the world, Christians gathering at the table has a powerful significance. When we gather, we are proclaiming through this sacrament that our unity in Christ is more powerful than any human division.

This immense work does not happen at once in one act of receiving. Rather, as our United Methodist doctrine proclaims, "As we encounter Christ in Holy Communion and are repeatedly touched by divine grace, we are progressively shaped into Christ's image. All of this work is not done in a moment, no matter how dramatic an experience we may enjoy. It is, instead, a lifelong process through which God intends to shape us into people motivated by love, empowered and impassioned to do Christ's work in the world."¹

¹ *This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion was adopted by the 2004 General Conference of The United Methodist Church. Copyright © 2003, 2004 The General Board of Discipleship of The United Methodist Church, PO Box 340003, Nashville TN 37203-0003., p. 10.*

This is a table where God's people gather to receive the means of grace through Christ's presence in bread and cup. This is a table where those who are broken come to remember that Christ's broken body is the means for our healing, and the healing of the world. This is a table where God's mysterious love for us is poured out, and where we receive that love so that we can become love in the world. This is a table of brokenness and a table of love. This is a table that is Christ's gift to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.