

## Seeking Com-Union

Oct. 1, 2017

As I mentioned with the children, today is Worldwide Communion Sunday. It's a celebration which originated with a Presbyterian pastor in 1933 who felt called to establish a celebration of Christian unity.

If you remember your world history, the 1920s and '30s were a time of great social upheaval. We were still reeling from World War I. Fascism was rearing its ugly head. The Great Depression was hitting hard all across the world. And Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr thought it would be a powerful tool to bring people together to remember that there is always enough room at God's table . . . that no matter what divides us, we are one in Christ . . . that we are responsible for each other.

Our social issues today may be somewhat different than those which Dr. Kerr was responding to. We may not be struggling to make sense after a world war, but we are struggling with humanity's inhumanity toward one another. Fascism may not be the official term of any current regime, but it is so much a part of our experience right now that the word of fascism was in the running for Miriam Webster's word of the year for 2016. We aren't in the midst of a global economic meltdown as we were in 1933, but today we are deeply conscious of the extreme economic and racial disparities in our country and all around the world. It seems like Dr. Kerr's context for promoting worldwide massive celebration of Christ's table is just as relevant today as it was in 1933.

Very often when we celebrate Worldwide Communion Sunday, the emphasis is on the "worldwide" part. Churches will sing songs from all over the globe. Very often churches will serve a variety of breads from different cultures around the globe to help us to remember the unity and diversity of all of us who come to the table. In the United Church of Christ, Worldwide Communion Sunday is typically the day that we receive our Neighbors in Need offering, the offering that funds our national church's justice and witness ministries.

These are all good and interesting and lovely ways to celebrate Worldwide Communion Sunday, and we will revisit those over the years, but today I'd like to have us take some time to focus on the Communion part of Worldwide Communion Sunday. What does Communion mean to you?

Without giving the reformed theologians too short of shrift, there were really three basic movements in the understanding of Communion in the Protestant Reformation. First, in the Roman Catholic tradition, the idea is that the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of God. They are Christ, the real presence of God. Huldrych Zwingli countered that idea by emphasizing the phrase from the last supper, "Do this in memory of me," therefore saying the Communion is a celebration of our memories of Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection. Martin Luther disagreed, saying that the real presence of Christ is found in Communion, but that the bread and wine don't wholly encompass Christ. So he said that Christ is connected to, but not contained in, the elements.

And then Calvin, the reformer with whom the United Church of Christ most closely identifies, sought a middle ground between Zwingli and Luther, suggesting that instead of putting the focus on our memories, like Zwingli did, or the elements themselves, like Luther did, he put the emphasis on the Holy Spirit who uses the elements of Communion and preaching to cause there to be a true spiritual communion with God and the recipient of the sacrament. We who partake in the elements and hear the word proclaimed are lifted up, as it were, into fellowship with the divine by grace.

One of the wonderful things about being part of a covenantal church like ours instead of a creedal church is that we do not insist on any one of those teachings. Indeed, I might even suggest that they're all helpful in their own way and in their own time as we attempt to understand the unfathomable mystery which God is. Nonetheless, despite the fact that the United Church of Christ does not insist on one teaching about Communion, it's important for us to teach about it, to learn about it, because if we don't, it will become a ritual or a symbol that ceases to have any meaning for us.

And so in your bulletins, you'll find a half sheet of paper that simply asks, "What is Communion to you?" Why do you participate? I'm going to briefly talk through a few common answers, and then Ray's going to play softly for a few moments while you take some time to put your answer down on paper. This is mostly an exercise for your edification. But I will ask that you place your responses in the offering plate as a symbol of your offering this understanding to God. Furthermore, if there are pieces that I think that might be useful to share with others I may ask you if I can share your thoughts at some point.

But before you start writing, what are some of the common responses to, "What is Communion for you?" Why do you receive? Well, without being too trite one is simple: because Jesus said so. Jesus told us in the Last Supper to do this in memory of him, and in doing so, we are following his command and it brings us closer to him.

Another understanding that often comes up when people are talking about why they celebrate Communion is the idea of unity and community. Think of this new card ministry that we're starting this weekend. It picks up on this facet a bit by reminding us that even those who aren't with us physically here are with us around the table of God's love.

Some people come to the table of love because they feel a tremendous healing in their souls when they celebrate Communion. Others find it incredibly nourishing in mind, body, and spirit.

Sometimes I'll talk with people about Communion being a soothing celebration, that Jesus fills in our cracks and heals us, heals our brokenness and makes us whole. Sometimes people talk about Communion as a celebration of reconciliation, that it reconciles us personally to God and to one another as well as reconciling the brokenness of this world. One of my favorite understandings of Communion is that of vocation, that this is our calling. Not only does the idea of a table where there is room for everyone give us an ideal, but it sends us forth with a mandate to make the rest of the world look like this celebration does: a place where there is always enough for everyone. It's a table

of abundance. I have yet to be a part of a celebration of Communion where there isn't enough.

There are many more understandings of what Communion is and why we celebrate. And so I now offer you a chance to reflect. Take some time. Answer the question. What is Communion to you? Why do you participate?

Friends, thank you for taking the time to reflect on Communion as we celebrate World-Wide Communion Sunday. My prayer this day is that we will all continue to be shaped by the grace we encounter here. Amen.

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