

October 3, 2021
Luke 22:14-23
“Love Fulfilled”
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

So today is officially World Communion Sunday. The now global observance actually began at a Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh, in 1933, with a pastor and his congregation seeking to highlight ecumenism and the unity and interconnectedness of Christian churches.

At some level it's inspiring to consider that billions of people around the world are, throughout the course of this day, sharing in the same ritual we're about to share together. And have been for millennia since Jesus did it first with his disciples.

But the irony, if we're being honest, is that there is in fact very little unity among Christian churches. Not even in what we believe within our own denomination, as the pending split makes clear. Not even in what we believe about Communion.

Jesus told his disciples to repeat the ritual meal in remembrance of him, and so the ritual is rightly central to Christian practice. But without specific instruction about how or how often it should be repeated, or anything else, the Church has unnecessarily filled the void with all kinds of different beliefs regarding the nature of the bread and wine, the frequency with which we should receive Communion, who is authorized to serve and receive Communion, what words have to be spoken to properly “consecrate” the meal, to make it sacred. And yes, whether the Communion cup should be filled with wine or grape juice.

On that point, I'm with Barbara Brown Taylor, who writes, “Sometimes I wondered if it even mattered whether our communion cups were filled with consecrated wine or draft beer, as long as we bent over them long enough to recognize each other as kin.”

As we so often do in the Christian church, we get caught up in rules and completely, COMPLETELY, lose sight of what actually matters. And what actually matters, of course, is love.

They will know we are Christians, followers of Jesus, by our love, not by our unity. Unity, frankly, is overrated, and ends up having much more to do with orthodoxy than orthopraxy, right belief than right practice.

On that point let me share a quote from William Sloane Coffin, as I have done many times before at Calvary and likely will do many times again because it cuts through the nonsense, the BULLSHIT – as Jesus himself did. He writes, “It is bad religion to deify doctrines and creeds. While indispensable to religious life, doctrines and creeds are only so as signposts. Love alone is the hitching post.” Love ALONE is the hitching post – hear that!

“Doctrines,” he goes on, “let’s not forget, supported slavery and apartheid; some still support keeping women in their places and gays and lesbians in limbo. Moreover, doctrines can divide while compassion can only unite.” That is the kind of unity we should be after. Ecumenical in our practice of love and compassion and justice. It’s the spirit, not the letter, of the law, that matters, Jesus says.

The ritual of communion is, above all else, a ritual of love. Some of you may know that early followers of Jesus gathered for what they called “agape meals” or “love feasts” – often including celebration of the Eucharist. And although the two eventually became separate practices, and still are, it’s a shame. We’d be better served if we stuck with calling Communion or the Eucharist a “love feast” because that’s exactly what it is.

We know, of course, that in celebrating communion we commemorate Jesus’s final meal with his disciples.

We remember that the meal Jesus shared with his disciples was a Passover meal, already a feast of liberation recalling God’s deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt.

And we remember that Jesus shared that Passover meal with his disciples on the night he would be arrested, the night before he would be tried, sentenced and executed by the Roman state. And for what? For speaking truth to power. For teaching and

practicing and organizing – grassroots, person-to-person, door-to-door, town-to-town organizing – around a love so radical, SO RADICAL, that it scared the you-know-what out of the religious and political and economic authorities of the day. A love SO RADICAL that it threatened to disrupt and dismantle the religious, political and economic power structures of the day. Structures whose power was, and still is, dependent on people divided, in fear. NOT united, in love, around common table, coming together around the simplest and most human of activity – breaking bread and sharing a drink to feed not only the body but the soul. To nourish the common good.

In celebrating communion we remember Jesus as EMBODIED love, love present and love renewed in the sharing of bread and cup. Every time, every time we share the bread and cup!

Every time we share in this simple, sacred meal – gathering as WE do at Calvary in a circle as wide around the table as it needs to be to make sure everyone has a place in it, a circle that allows us to SEE each other – the divine love that Jesus embodied, in both life and in death, in both blessing and brokenness, moves a step closer to fulfillment as the beloved community, the very kin-dom of God.

Remember, as Lauren read for us this morning, that in sitting down at the table with his disciples, including Judas, the disciple who would betray him, Jesus says, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.”

Jesus is passing the torch. He’s reminding his disciples, and us along with them, that IT, the work of Passover, liberation, love, is theirs to do. The work of fulfilling the kin-dom of God, making it real on earth as it is in heaven, is theirs and ours to do.

So share this meal, and whenever you do, Jesus says, remember me and remember the love I embodied. And then, with your hunger satisfied and your thirst quenched, go and do likewise the work of love and liberation.

In thinking about all this, Amy shared what one of her professors in seminary, Don Saliers, used to emphasize when celebrating communion. (Don Saliers, by the way, the father of Emily Saliers of Indigo Girls fame, for those of you who are fans!)

He suggested that in REMEMBERING Jesus and the love he embodied, his body broken in love, there is an invitation to RE-MEMBER the broken body of Christ, the whole of creation. Do this in RE-MEMBERANCE of me. As you did or did not show love to one of the lease of these who are members of my family, you did or did not do it to me. That's what it's about!

Two other quick Communion stories to illustrate what it's about:

The first comes from 2004 General Conference, the global gathering of the United Methodist Church held every four years. It was in Pittsburgh, my last year of seminary, and I was there as an observer with some fellow students and faculty.

The body voted, as it had done before and has continued to do since, to confirm the church's official, discriminatory position excluding LGBTQ persons from full inclusion in the life of the church. After the vote, in an act of protest and rage, someone took one of the Communion chalices and threw it on the ground – breaking it into pieces.

One of my professors, Heather Elkins, and others gathered up the pieces, put them back together, and later – in a gathering with those committed to keep fighting for full inclusion – celebrated Communion using that same chalice. Holding both the dis-membering and re-membering of beloved community.

The second story comes from Calvary, almost exactly 20 years ago. I was struggling to decide whether or not to go to seminary.

We were gathered in our usual circle around the table. The Communion elements had already been distributed and we were singing. Some of you remember the Olayas, Amy and Rich, who were attending at the time. Their oldest son, Manny, was about two years old at the time, and I remember, like it was yesterday, that he walked over to me, looked straight into my eyes and put his arms up – an unspoken request to pick him up.

Now understand that I had no history with Manny at that point. He did not know me and I did not know him. I didn't have a kid yet myself, and so also wasn't particularly comfortable with small children. But I picked him up and held him in my arms, because that's what he needed me to do. And that's what I needed to do.

It was a profoundly moving experience for me, I could almost cry now thinking about it. I am not big into signs, but that's as close as I've ever come to believing. I decided in that moment that I was going to seminary. But I share the story with you now because it also affirmed for me the essence of the Communion ritual. It's about opening our arms to receive and offer the divine love Jesus embodied, to embrace each other with that same love.

Every time we share in this simple meal together, and indeed anytime we, any of us, anywhere, engage and embrace each other with that kind of liberating, re-mem-bering love, it is ALREADY sacred because we are bringing the kin-dom of God, the kin-dom of love, the world as God intends, the world Jesus died trying to save, closer to fulfillment. It is already and ALWAYS sacred.

It doesn't require ordained clergy or specific words of consecration or specific elements to make it so. And it doesn't even require that we do it in person – a belief, by the way, that is not supported by United Methodist doctrine, which discourages online celebration of the Eucharist at home.

Some rules are meant to be broken, amen! Love travels. Love alone is the hitching post!

On that note, let me close by reading the words to the song we're about to sing, which I think provide a pretty good summary of what this sacred meal, which we're about to share together, is all about:

As we gather at your table,
as we listen to your word
help us know, O God, your presence;
let our hearts and minds be stirred.
Nourish us with sacred story till we claim it as our own;

teach us through this holy banquet
how to make Love's victory known.

Turn our worship into witness
in the sacrament of life;
send us forth to love and serve you,
bringing peace where there is strife.
Give us, Christ, your great compassion
to forgive as you forgave;
may we still behold your image
in the world you died to save.

Gracious Spirit, help us summon
other guests to share that feast
where triumphant Love will welcome
those who had been last and least.
There no more will envy blind us
nor will pride our peace destroy,
as we join with saints and angels
to repeat the sounding joy.

May it be so.