

Around the Table, Around the World
I Corinthians 10:14-17; Mark 14:22-25
October 4, 2020

Today is world communion Sunday – around this table and around the world. Today we reach out and join hands with our brothers and sisters in Christ everywhere, feasting at one large, eternal banquet table. We worship as one, as God surely intends. Most churches are gathered through Zoom, but united in spirit nonetheless.

World Communion Sunday originated in the Presbyterian Church. In 1936, the first Sunday in October was celebrated in the United States and overseas. After a few years, the idea spread, and today World Communion is celebrated in Christian churches around the world.

Today we are reminded that we *have* a family and we *are* a family beyond church walls. It is a sacrament to cherish today and every time we share in this meal. Today you are invited to the table – your own kitchen table perhaps, and it is a personal invitation to you, just as Jesus addressed the disciples that night in the upper room around the table.

Imagine you were there with the twelve. That same intimacy and spiritual presence still prevails today. As we heard in Mark's gospel this morning, in the breaking of the bread and the lifting of the cup, we recall that God loved us enough to become one of us.

According to scripture, as Jesus shared in our death - so we share in his resurrection, because of his love and faithfulness to God and to us. So often, we talk about how *we* need to believe in this God of love; but what we celebrate today reminds us that God also needs and desires us to be a part of the kingdom of God and the body of Christ.

We are told in the creation story in Genesis that we are created in the image and likeness of God. We are a part of God's family, a family that stretches around the world, a family that is called to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven, and to give as we have received.

Communion means many things to different people, and I think it takes on different meanings depending on your situation and life circumstances. When you lose a loved one or you face difficult news, this meal gives you strength. When the road is hard, and your life is shrouded in darkness and doubt, this meal encourages you and helps you to go on. When you feel joy and experience the depths of God's grace, this meal is spread before you in celebration. When you are worn out and

worried about covid, this meal comforts. You are invited to share in this meal because you are a part of God's family, and there is always room around God's table for one more. We gather today to both commemorate and celebrate.

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Growing up, if someone dropped by our house around dinnertime, they *had* to stay for dinner! I mean, they *had* to stay! My grandmother made sure of that, and you would not want to argue with her! We'd just pulled up another chair, and squeezed everyone in.

Miraculously, the more there were the more food there seemed to be to go around. Where have we heard that before? Talk about loaves and fishes. My grandmother had a talent for multiplying the pot roast and mashed potatoes! Making room so everyone is welcome . . . making room so everyone can be fed. The Church is called to be like that, too.

Sometimes I think most of what I learned about God at an early age happened around the kitchen table. Well, at any age for that matter. It is still true. Today in God's Church, things are pretty much the same way. Much of what you need to know about God's love and grace can be experienced around the table and over a meal. I look forward to the time when we can gather around a table and break bread together again. I have faith that day will come.

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For the early church – called the People of the Way -- communion was a means of remembering Jesus by reenacting his last supper. The sharing of the meal was a way of keeping alive his memory in their midst, and also celebrating a very real spiritual presence.

In the gospel this morning, we are taken back to the historical setting. In Mark, the setting was the Passover Feast. Every religious person would have been familiar with the feast – it was a reminder of how the Jewish people were lead out of slavery in Egypt. The celebration would include the sacrificial lamb, the bitter herbs and unleavened bread.

According to Mark's gospel, near the end of Jesus' life, he celebrated this last supper with his disciples. Over the centuries, as Christians have shared this sacrament, they have experienced something more than simply an act of remembering.

Like them, we have come to experience at the table a spiritual presence that endures -- a divine presence that comes to us through the simple act of sharing bread and the cup. Therefore, this sacramental meal becomes more than just a remembrance, but an actual experience of God with us, at least to my way of thinking.

We do not ascribe to the doctrine of transubstantiation in the Protestant church, meaning that the bread and cup actually become the physical body and blood of Christ. But I do believe that spiritually Christ is present, and ministers to us just the same through the spiritual reality of the bread and the cup. Sharing in this supper brings us comfort and restores hope in a way that goes beyond the rational mind.

As a young man, I used to insist on having a rational explanation for everything. Now it is enough to have faith that God understands, and invites all who believe to the Lord's Supper. That's good enough for me!

World Communion Sunday in particular makes me recall the many tables over the years where I have found hospitality and grace. Some have gone on to the Church Triumphant, and are sharing in the sacred feast at the Lord's Table in the kingdom, where every day they are in communion with God.

I remember taking communion to people and places that were not at all in a church --to hospitals, nursing homes. I remember breaking bread with some who were on their deathbed, waiting for the Lord to call them home, and they could almost taste that heavenly manna. I remember taking communion to members who were incarcerated in prisons, and I remember breaking bread with patients in state mental hospitals where I was a chaplain in Chicago.

I remember celebrating World Communion in a middle school and in a movie theatre where we held worship as a new church, because we did not have a building. We served adults who were receiving communion for the very first time. So many sacred moments ... so many sacred places and people.

This day is very special in that same way. There is a strong sense that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, as the author of Hebrew puts it. Thank God, as my grandmother used to say, "We are what we eat," and the one thing we had in common in all of these diverse circumstances is that we were all breaking bread as the body of Christ. When we celebrate the sacrament together, we are visibly reminded that we are joined to one another, both in our homes and around the world today.

I would like to end with a story about what it means to feed each other. There is an ancient Chinese parable about an old man who knew he would die soon. He wanted to know what Heaven and hell were like. He visited a wise man in his village to ask "Can you tell me what Heaven and hell are like?"

The wise man led him down a strange path, deep into the countryside. Finally, they came upon a large house with many rooms and went inside. Inside they found lots of people and many enormous tables with an incredible array of food. Then the old man noticed a strange thing. The people, all thin and hungry, were holding

chopsticks that were twelve feet long. They tried to feed themselves, but of course could not get the food to their mouths with such long chopsticks.

The old man then said to the wise man "Now I know what hell looks like, will you please show me what Heaven looks like?" The wise man led him down the same path a little further until they came upon another large house similar to the first. They went inside and saw many people well fed and happy. They too had long chopsticks.

This puzzled the old man and he asked, "I see all of these people also have large chopsticks, yet they are well fed and happy, please explain this to me." The wise man replied, "In Heaven, we feed each other."

Today I think it is obvious at which table we want to be. Amen

I Corinthians 10:15-17

I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Mark 14:22-25

The Institution of the Lord's Supper

²² While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." ²³ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴ He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵ Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."