

## “Why I Take Communion”

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This is World Wide Communion Sunday. Throughout the world churches of all denominations, in all nations, in many languages, are celebrating the Lord’s Supper. Remembering the last meal that Jesus had with his disciples before his arrest, trial and execution. Earlier today, while many of us were in bed sleeping, Christians in other parts of the world, some separated by vast distances, gathered to take Communion. In places like Wenzhou, China, where just a couple of years ago the government threatened to bulldoze the church, and thousands of Chinese Christians gathered to form a human shield in defense, those same men and women approached the table of Christ to receive the bread and the cup. Or in the country of Egypt, where Christians still make up about one tenth of the population and have in recent years endured endless persecution, many took the risk to find their way to worship this day, to participate in the Eucharist. And in St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, England, a building that has stood since the turn of the 7th century, while kingdoms and ages have past, the words, “this is my body given for you, this is my blood poured out for you,” were spoken once again.

Today we are reminded and celebrate that this sacrament of Communion in which we participate and of which we are recipients, is not something that we do alone. In spite of the time and distance that may separate us from other Christians, this is not an isolated occurrence that is an exclusive activity of St. Stephen’s on-the-Hill that we do four or five times a year. This is a universal declaration that connects us and reconnects us with people around the globe. It’s along the lines of something that I read recently in a collection of reflections I recently read that

was titled, "Why I take Communion." One of the reflections was from a fellow named Bruce Reyes-Chow, a Presbyterian Minister who said,

"I take communion because it reminds me that the Body of Christ goes far beyond those who circle the table in our little church; rather it is extended to those whom we will most likely never meet, which in turn compels us to live in the world as if every person is a brother or sister."

You see, The Lord's Supper teaches us something about our unity...our closeness. The unity and closeness to be found in our humanity...a humanity embodied in Christ...a humanity that includes our mortality. The Apostle Paul tried to get this point across to the members of the church in Corinth. Especially in this text that Diane read for us is buried in the midst of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. The members of the Corinthian church really hadn't embraced the message of unity that was so important to Christ's own mission and purpose. They were a divided church, their division was quite obvious in many aspects of their life...but perhaps no more so then when they celebrated the Lord's Supper.

Our text reveals that when they gathered to eat the Lord's Supper that, "each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another drunk." What was happening was that the Corinthians were not treating the Lord's Supper as something special and different. Instead of embracing the deeper meaning and symbolism that existed within the meal, they were treating it as they would have treated any other meal in their day.

It was quite common back then that people would gather for meals and eat and have a good time. Ones who were excluded would often stand outside, observing through windows or looking on from the margins, watching others feast while they themselves went hungry. There was a division between the haves and the have nots...the worthy and the unworthy. There were ones who could afford to participate and indulge themselves in feasting and ones who

were excluded. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know, in no uncertain terms, that their divisions were not acceptable. He explained that to participate in the Lord's Supper and leave others out was tantamount to drinking and eating judgment upon themselves. They weren't coming together, they were keeping their distance.

You know, I think this frustration of Paul from two thousand years ago points to the larger difficulties we still face as we come together on this World Communion Sunday. We are still a church that likes to keep our distance from others for all sorts of reasons, be them political, theological, sociological, national or economic. These differences that we have between the churches are even seen in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Some churches, like the United Church of Canada, practice open communion, that is, we allow any and all to come to the Lord's Table. Other denominations practice what has been called closed communion, although the denominations that practice this don't like to call it that. They do not allow you to take unless you are a member of their denomination. In some churches, communion is served every week. In others, it is rarely ever mentioned. And, it might come as a surprise to you, some churches do not serve communion at all.

So here we are on a day that is called World Wide Communion Sunday. There are those who would argue that far from bringing us together, such an occasion as this really simply underscores how far apart we are. There are many who will not even recognize World Wide Communion Sunday. So rather than emphasizing a theme of unity, some would argue, it accomplishes just the opposite. Some would argue that it proves that the church is not the body of Christ, but the broken body of Christ. It's as if we eat and drink judgment upon ourselves.

Why then bother to have such a day? Why even take communion? My answer is this. It sends a message to the Christian community at large, that if there is anything that could and should bring us together, it is the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. This was Paul's message to the Corinthians. As he says, "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." The Corinthians, and us too, are to be reminded that this is Christ's body and Christ's blood. Although bread and wine are ordinary elements, this is no ordinary meal. It is a meal where we are reminded of the distance that Jesus dared to overcome, even the distance created by death, to bring people together. This meal has a lot to say about our mortality.

One of the things that always humbles me when I meditate and reflect upon Jesus' last supper with his disciples is this: Here was a man who, knew he was about to die and knew the suffering that awaited him. Yet instead of going out and leaving his disciples behind to perhaps enjoy himself and make the most of his last night on this earth, or even feeling sorry for himself and going off alone somewhere. Instead of being caught up in his own mortality, he planned a meal for his friends...even for ones who he knew would betray him and abandon him. And not just any meal, he took the time to wash the feet of his disciples, to serve them and care for them. His imminent death, his mortality was not a reason for him to distance himself from his disciples and friends...it was an occasion to bring them together. It was about giving them something to remind them of him, even after they had betrayed and abandoned him, even

each other. This meal instituted by Christ Jesus held a deeper purpose, to remind them of their oneness in the humanity he embodied...a humanity that included death.

You see, there is something that can divide human beings, cut us off from others, it's when we get concerned with our own individual mortality. We begin to show a limited concern for others. So often our fight for survival as individuals and as groups and nations causes us to compete for our own sense of worthiness. Others become ones who stand in the way of our well being and future prosperity. How much of the political rhetoric we hear in this world is rooted in this mindset? We look at others with suspicion because we believe them to be standing in the way of our agendas and potential successes...they are threats to our existence.

The problem is that we end up creating a distance...a divide as a result. In Christ we behold one who reminds us that death far from being something that divides us...this is something that unites all of us to one another...even to God in Christ. The mystery is that when we share in this, when we come to realize the universal reality of death...of our mortality, we should begin to behold a deeper kinship with others. Death isn't something that divides us, it is something that unites us.

If you want an image as to what I mean, let me take a scene for you from the movie "Sully." I don't know how many of you have gone to see Sully. It's Tom Hank's latest role, portraying Capt. Chelsey Sullenberger the pilot who made the emergency landing of a US Airways Airbus on the Hudson River with 155 people on board. I was struck by the image at the end of the movie of the plane floating in the middle of the Hudson River, the passengers waiting to be rescued, and all of the boats and emergency services that came together, even in the frigid waters of the Hudson River in January, even in the face of death, to work for and rescue

and preserve the life of others. The image isn't one of division, with everyone going their own way, the image is one of unity, of coming together of overcoming the distance, of seeking life for all, even as they faced their own mortality.

I know we can think of other similar images of times when people have come together in such ways. But have you ever asked yourself at times why it takes some great disaster or time of trial in order for this to happen? Yes, those are times when we see humanity at its best and deserves to be celebrated. But just imagine what the world would be like if we lived out this promise and this hope in the mundane...in life's more ordinary moments. Seeing ourselves and one another as the fragile, mortal creatures we are, accepting this reality, seeing one another and our needs as being more similar than different. Daring to proclaim this shared mortality that strangely shows us the way to a different kind of life...that leads to what I believe Jesus meant when he referred to abundant life. If only we took the things that unite us as seriously as we sometimes take the things that divide us.

It's why I take communion.

I like how Monica Coleman, Professor of African-American Religion at Claremont University put it in that collection of reflections I read when she was asked why she took Communion. She said:

Once a month, I gather with community --some are friends; some I barely know.  
We tell stories of how God brought us out of difficult times and into freedom.

This is bread for our journey together.

We sit at the table with people who have hurt us.

We trust that God will give us the grace we need to be more than we are.

We drink in these promises of God.

Once a month, I gather in community  
to learn friendship, fellowship and forgiveness  
from what Jesus did...how he died for all...  
this kind of work requires a meal.

Thanks be to God.