

October 3, 2021  
World Communion Sunday  
ōDo This in Remembrance of Meö  
1 Corinthians 11:17-34, Galatians 3:26-29  
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Today is World Communion Sunday, the day we celebrate the Lord's Supper with Christians all over the globe. It seems like a good day to think about what communion means and why we practice it like we do. Of course Jesus instituted the Lord Supper during the Passover Celebration on the night that he was betrayed. The gospel of Luke tells us, "When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.

Of course, theology informs what we believe about communion. Catholics and Lutherans believe that the bread and the wine actually transform into the body and blood of Christ during communion. Other denominations believe that the elements don't transform, but that Christ is present in them in a real way. In these traditions, only those who are ordained can handle the elements, and congregants always come forward to receive them at the altar. In the Catholic and Lutheran traditions, communion is the focal point of the service, and they practice it every week. The architecture of their churches reflect this theology.

If you enter a church in these traditions, what is in the center of the chancel and at the highest point? The altar or communion table. And it almost always has a rail around it that separates the elements and the clergy from the people. Preaching plays a less important role in these churches, so where is the pulpit? ó Off to one side.

In the free church tradition, of which we are a part, we believe that the Lord's supper elements are symbolic ó they represent the body and blood of Christ. Where do we most often put our communion table? On the floor, where it is accessible to everyone. And what does our architecture say about our theology? What are our focal points? Preaching and baptism are central to our tradition.

Did you know that science and culture have both influenced how we serve communion? Back in the 1860's Louis Pasteur introduced germ theory and we learned about how germs can spread from person to person. Fermented wine was used in the common chalice for communion, because we understood that alcohol kills germs. But what else happened about the same time? The temperance movement began and for many churches, it became problematic to use alcohol for communion. Some churches moved to non-fermented grape juice ó but there were two problems with that. First, it didn't kill germs in a common cup, and second, large scale refrigeration wasn't available, and unrefrigerated grape juice fermented quickly.

It was around this time that congregations in the free church tradition moved to individual communion cups. This solved the germ problem but it also brought about a subtle theological shift. Instead of everyone coming forward to receive the elements ó which spoke to the communal nature of the meal, we began to receive individual elements in our seats. In this way, communion became a much more personal and private practice instead of a shared meal. Of course recently, the pandemic has pushed us one step farther in that direction as we use the prefilled cups.

Here is an interesting piece of trivia for you this morning. Individual communion cups solved the germ problem, but it didn't help with spoilage. In the late 1860's a Methodist minister who was also a dentist, applied the pasteurization process to grape juice to keep it from

fermenting or spoiling. Does anybody know who he was? Charles Welch. Welch's grape juice was originally called *Dr. Welch's Unfermented Communion Wine*.

Today, churches everywhere conduct communion as a fairly solemn and orderly affair which is appropriate - but that's not how I picture that first Lord's supper with Jesus and the disciples. You see, Jesus had been talking about suffering, and sacrifice and death. Then he said that one of them would betray him - I picture them casting sidelong glances around the table, trying to guess who that would be possibly be? Then Jesus interrupted the normal order of the Passover service to introduce this new ritual. "Wait," I can hear the disciples thinking, "we've never done it this way before."

And have you ever thought about who was gathered around the table that night? Yes, it was the disciples, his closest followers; but they were far from a perfect group. Judas was about to leave to betray Jesus, and Peter would do the same before the night was over. In Luke, right after the institution of the Lord's Supper, the disciples argued again over who was the greatest among them. Indeed, they were far from a perfect group of people. But Jesus loved them anyway - he invited them to the table and entrusted them with carrying on the work of the kingdom after he was gone.

Unfortunately, Jesus's example of openness and inclusivity didn't last long, did it? In the I Corinthians passage we heard a few minutes ago, we learn that the church at Corinth was not handling the Lord's Supper well. Paul is upset with them because there are divisions in the church. It appears that they had a fellowship meal on the night they celebrated the Lord's Supper - that's a good idea. The problem was, the richer folks were arriving early with the "better" food - and they were feasting and over-drinking before the less affluent folks could get off work and arrive with more meager fare. Paul's words are stern, "You show contempt for the church of God

and humiliate those who have nothing. When you come together, he continues, wait for one another.

These words complement our second scripture passage today, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

I love the inclusive nature of these words of scripture, and I wish that all churches applied them to their observance of the Lord's Supper. Unlike Farmville Baptist, in some churches you cannot participate in communion unless you are a member of that particular church. If we had that policy here, that would exclude me, and any college students who call us their home away from home. I imagine it would exclude some of you as well.

While I agree with Paul that we should not enter into communion lightly, I also appreciated an article in the Christian Century this week written by Peter Marty. In his piece entitled, "Who is Welcome at the Communion Table," he talks about visiting a church where this sentence appeared in the bulletin: "If you are baptized and believe in Jesus Christ, you are invited to commune with us." While that's more generous language than many churches manage, Marty noted, it sounded like gatekeeping to him; it's permission-oriented. The *if* is a big fat notice of conditional eligibility.

The "commune with us" language suggests that an in-group exists apart from everybody else who comes in the door. But isn't everybody a guest in the house and at the table of the Lord?, Marty asks. What feels like doctrinal conscientiousness on the inside can

often look like cliquishness and exclusion on the outside— a look that’s never done any favors for the church.

Marty continues, “In every tradition, there are those who grow nervous if they sense the church seems too open with its Lord’s supper hospitality. When access to grace looks too convenient, some get uneasy. Letting a person commune who hasn’t been properly instructed on the full meaning of the meal or on every particularity of baptism might strike them as dangerous.<sup>1</sup> I imagine that a number of you would affirm these thoughts this morning.

Of course it is ideal for us to understand our rituals and to prepare to participate in them fully and appropriately, rituals lose their meaning if we don’t understand their meaning. It’s why we have new member’s classes or catechisms. But Peter Marty poses an interesting question. He asks, what if experience and practice **precede** belief, rather than the other way around? He notes that there is a lot about faith and life that we come to trust, believe, and understand only after we’ve experienced different things. For example, no advance instruction or rules will cause a person to fall in love, make friends, or enjoy the taste of a particular food. Yet firsthand experience with each of these, especially spread out over time, may make a believer out of them as they find joy and meaning in love, friendship, and good food.

As a pastor, Marty thinks of 29-year-old twin brothers in his congregation. When their parents push their wheelchairs forward for communion, he has no idea if they “believe in Jesus.” Their cerebral palsy is too severe for him to make meaning of the sounds they speak. But he places the wine-soaked bread in their mouths nonetheless. “Love is or it ain’t,” writes Toni Morrison. “Thin love ain’t love at all.” Maybe it’s time we start seeing the Eucharist as Christ doling out thick love to all God’s people, Marty says, whether their belief

is sturdy, shaky, or very much unformed. That sounds a great deal like Jesus and those early disciples to me.

### **Prayer after Communion**

Leader: O God, through this bread and this cup, you have made us one with you and with one another. May the unity we find at this table be a gift that we carry out into your suffering, divided world. Help us to find strength in knowing that you, the God of peace, will always be with us.

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<sup>i</sup> Peter Marty, "Who is Welcome at the Communion Table," *Christian Century*, September 24, 2021. Accessed online 9-30-2021.