“Come to the Table”

Luke 22:14-23

1 Corinthians 10:14-24

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World Communion Sunday evokes for me many images and memories of communion — some sweet and some a bit shameful.  Most of my memories are around traditional Presbyterian tables, but some are around tables in Cuba, Mexico, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Some memories are instructional — what communion is, theologically and practically. And some memories are more sensory — what I remember seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting.

I cannot remember a time in which I didn’t take communion at church, but I know that wasn’t always the case.  I know that at some point, when my mom thought I might be mature enough to begin to understand communion, she sat me down and explained it to me — what it is, what it means — and after that, I was taking communion with all the adults.

After I’d been receiving communion for a while, my mom decided to check in with me. “How do you like communion? What does it mean to you and for you?” To this day, I still feel shame when I remember my answer. I knew that communion was a deeply serious time in worship. I knew that *something* was happening when we received the bread and the little glass thimble cups, but I didn’t know what. I knew that it connected me to Jesus and to the Church, but I just didn’t have the words for it. So instead I said to her, “Communion is great! Snack time at church!” I knew as soon as I said it, that it wasn’t the right answer and that instead of trying to find the words, I’d cheated myself and said something that I didn’t actually believe. I knew it wasn’t snack. I knew it was more.

Disappointed, my mom said, “If communion is just a snack for you during worship, then perhaps you’re not ready to receive communion.”  I assured her that I was and that I knew it wasn’t a snack. That day, even in the second grade, I began to appreciate the mystery of communion. I learned to appreciate and to trust that even when I don’t fully understand what happens in the exact moment of communion, I trust that the Holy Spirit is present, at work unseen, moving around me and helping me to find whatever it is I need in that moment — whether it’s nourishment, bread for the journey, reconciliation, hope, wonder, forgiveness, or joy.

There was the time when I was working in Memphis and the congregation at the church where I worked had gathered at a Presbyterian camp for a weekend of fellowship and recreation. We closed out the weekend with worship outdoors on Sunday morning and communion by intinction. I watched as the first row of folks got up to stand in line to take a chunk out of the bread and dip it in the cup. I watched as my boss, holding her three year old got to the front of the line.  Then I watched as her sweet boy did a full-on three year old sneeze right on the half a loaf of bread.

While Rebekah held her son with a mortified look on her face, the church workers in the congregation quickly did the math. They had been seated in the front row. We still had to feed about 100 people with half a loaf of bread. How in the world would this last? And then I watched as our own loaves and fishes miracle occurred and somehow that half a loaf of bread stretched to feed the entire crowd. I learned that day that the table is a table of plenty, that God’s grace will always be abundant, and that you can’t always control when a beloved child of God has to sneeze.

There were also the times when I was in seminary, where we celebrated communion every Friday during chapel. When I was a second year student, I had a polity class right before chapel every Friday. Polity is the really exciting class where you pour over the Book of Order and learn Robert’s Rules of Order...you know...all the reasons why folks want to become ministers.

But in the process of reading the Book of Order and learning how to moderate a Session, some issues started popping up about which people had very strong opinions. Questions about ordination of LGBTQ+ folk. Questions about who can receive communion.  Questions about infant baptism. Big topics with big opinions on every side.

Some days our discussions weren’t exactly loving as people argued passionately for or against something. Some days we left class with burning cheeks and anger boiling below the surface.

But then, we’d go straight to chapel. And we’d confess our sins and receive forgiveness and hear God’s Word read and proclaimed and then we’d stand up to get in line to receive communion.  Often, we would find ourselves in front of or behind someone with whom we’d argued just an hour earlier. We’d wind our way to the front of the line and receive the exact same piece of bread to dip in the exact same cup and hear the exact same words said to each and every one of us - This is the body of Christ, broken for you. This is the cup of salvation, poured out for you.  And we’d remember that we are, each one of us, a beloved child of God, whom God has invited to the table. I learned during those Friday chapels, especially during that semester of polity, that the table to which God calls us is one of reconciliation and love.

There was the time I gathered at the beach with the women of my home church in Durham for a women’s retreat. For our Saturday evening meal, we shared what our minister called a “sacramental feast.” A clean, crisp tablecloth was placed on the table and sprays of wildflowers were placed throughout. Instead of the traditional bread and wine of communion, we had a buffet of good, but simple foods — salads and hummus and tabouli, fresh, ripe fruits and veggies, multiple loaves of bread and jams and jellies, and the always appreciated Presbyterian pound cake for dessert.

We took our time eating, enjoying the variety of flavors and each other’s company. We laughed together. We told stories of women who had attended this yearly retreat in the past who were no longer with us. We thought about that last meal that Jesus and his disciples shared...that Jesus *and his friends* shared...and we gave thanks for the variety of experiences of table fellowship that have been passed down in our tradition throughout the years.

And then there’s one of the most meaningful experiences of communion for me — one of the last times I visited Virginia Wetzel, a founding member of this congregation.  We knew that Virginia was dying and so this would most likely be the last time that she would receive communion.  I invited Bill Von Seldeneck, Janey Terry, and Betty Bonham to join me in delivering communion to Virginia.

If you never had the privilege of knowing Virginia, there are a few things you should know.  One is that she always had a smile on her face, even in her last days. Her smile came from a genuine love of people as well as a wicked sense of humor.

And the other thing to know is that she cared deeply for this congregation. Her brother, Jim Morrison, who died earlier this week started the initial petition to form this congregation on the north end of town and Virginia followed soon after. She made it a lifelong practice of inviting and welcoming everyone to Covenant.  When I arrived in town, just a few months before her death, she welcomed me as if I’d been a pastor at Covenant for as long as John had.

So, as we gathered around Virginia in her room at the Legacy, it was with the anticipation of the loss we would soon face as a congregation and as individuals who loved her deeply.

I began the communion liturgy.  I was doing fine until I got to the ancient words:

“Virginia, this is the body of Christ, broken for you. Virginia, this is the cup of salvation poured out for you.”

I choked on the words.

I knew them by heart and so I was looking directly at her as I said them, tears beginning to cascade down my face. And the whole time, there she was, smiling at me with the most encouraging look on her face that said, “You’ve got this, Sarah!”

When it was all over, after everyone had served each other and we closed with prayer, I was embarrassed. Here I was...*a professional minister with well over five months of ordained ministry experience under my belt*...and I couldn’t keep it together for communion.

But Virginia took both of my hands with an earnest smile on her face and with a wink said to me, “Sarah, I hope you cry a thousand more times.”

She helped me see the deep emotions tied to communion. She helped me to remember how deeply personal communion can be. Sometimes as a pastor, I can get caught up in the busy-ness of communion. Are all the elders here? Is there enough bread? Has everyone been served? Does Chris have enough music to play if it goes longer? (That last one, John and I never really worry about because Chris is such a professional!)  But I can get so caught up in that busy-ness, that I can forget what is happening in this moment when the people of God come together to share this meal — that it’s deeply personal and meaningful. That people participate in and receive more than just ritual at the table. Virginia helped me let go, and let me experience.

We all have memories of communion — some fresh and some that we’ve carried with us for decades. Some good and some sad. But all of them are important in shaping our understanding of who God is, of what can happen when we meet God and each other here.

What memories come to mind when you think of communion?

When you think of communion, do you picture this exact table? Or is your mental image different?

Is it the coffee table or dining room table that served as your communion table during this pandemic?

Or is it one from a different congregation?  Or maybe even a different country?

Raise your hand if you had to wait until you were a confirmand to take communion.

Raise your hand if you can’t remember a time when you couldn’t take communion.

Raise your hand if you’ve ever knelt to receive communion.

Raise your hand if you’ve ever received communion in a different country.

I won’t ask you to raise your hand, but perhaps some of you have been denied communion or seen communion denied to someone else for whatever reason.

World communion Sunday celebrates the universal table of God who invites all of us, from every walk of life, every country, every single one of us to join God there.

In our text from Luke today, Jesus serves all of his disciples, every single one of them. He serves James and John, who in the past have argued about who would get to sit with Jesus in glory. He serves Peter for whom he has great plans for the building of the Church, but who also will deny Christ three times later that night.  And he even serves Judas, the one who will ultimately betray him.  Even Judas gets served.

Everyone was served on that night long ago, and everyone who wishes will be served today.

In communion, we remember. Not only Jesus’s first communion with the disciples 2000 years ago, but for many of us, we remember the many times we’ve come to this table.  We remember times we came with joy, eager to receive the bread and the cup, and times when we came timidly, perhaps deep in grief or doubt. But we also remember that every time we approach this table, no matter what we are carrying with us, God welcomes us there.

As we move into our communion celebration in a few moments, I invite you to linger in the moment a little longer than usual. As you receive the elements, check in with yourself and with God. What do you bring to the table today and what do you find at the table today? Mystery? Joy? Sorrow? Doubt? Faith? Fuel?

Theologian Justo Gonazalez reminds us that in communion, “We bring our gifts, but we are not the hosts. It is much as when we are invited to dinner and we bring our hosts a bottle of wine or a box of cookies.  The table is still theirs.  It is not our gifts that nourish us.  When the celebrant says, ‘The gifts of God for the people of God,’ we are being invited to share not only in what we offered, but also in what God is offering.

My friends, let us see what sacramental surprises God will offer us today.

All praise be to God. Amen.