
Be a sacrament to others
Martin Grove United Church
October 6, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 11:17-26 and Luke 22:14-27

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. Now I know that for some of you, you find that exciting because it means we are having communion, period. But World Communion is not just about us having communion here, it's about all churches around the world celebrating communion today. What's not to like? And yet, usually we just have a normal communion here. There is no cake following this service. We don't really imagine World Communion Sunday to be more special than regular communion. Today we will celebrate communion, but you probably came here not expecting to actually celebrate, did you? Did anyone even bring an air horn?

I remember as a student at Emmanuel College, one Wednesday afternoon we were invited to celebrate communion in the chapel. But immediately following that service there was a reception put on by a foreign student who had finished her time at Emmanuel and was heading back to her home country. During the communion service we spoke about sharing an "abundant feast", and then during the communion we were all given tiny pieces of bread. At the reception afterwards, we had a massive buffet with vast quantities of amazing ethnic foods. I wasn't the only student to say - finally, an actual feast! I have learned that although we often throw the word "celebrate" around in the church, we have no expectation of a party.

But today, there are 2 things that make this service exceptional. 2 things that elevate this service above "normal" communion. 2 things. 1 thing that you can see, and 1 thing that you can feel, emotionally. What do you want to hear about first? The thing you can see or the thing you can feel?

Let's start with what I hope we can feel, emotionally. Today we not only celebrate communion, we also celebrate "full communion". If you don't know what full communion is, don't panic. Perhaps you think it means that normal communion is really only part of communion, and there is another part that we usually skip that makes

communion “full”. Well, no. Other than the fact that we use grape juice instead of wine we are not missing anything at communion. The term “full communion” actually refers to how different denominations treat each other. And this year, we celebrate that we have just entered into a full communion agreement with a denomination called “The Disciples of Christ” which is based in the United States. Quoting from the United Church web site: “The full communion agreement between The United Church of Canada and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) marks a new era of ecumenical partnership in North America. Full communion agreements generally rest on five pillars of acceptance and cooperation:

- common confession of Christ
- mutual recognition of members
- common celebration of the Lord’s Supper/ Holy Communion
- mutual recognition and reconciliation of ordered ministers
- common commitment to mission.

Full communion is a mutual commitment between two denominations to grow together towards a vision of the church that enriches our theological traditions, enhances service and mission, and deepens worship.”¹

In practical terms, it means that the United Church of Canada and the Disciples of Christ agree that we are similar. For example, church members can transfer between a United Church of Canada congregation and a Disciples of Christ congregation with a simple transfer letter - much the same as if you were to transfer your membership from another United Church to Martin Grove United Church. Also, ordered ministers are seen as essentially transferrable too. The next time you search for a minister, you could end up interviewing a minister from the Disciples of Christ, and you would be free to call them into ministry here. It is not a merger between denominations, it is an agreement that we hold many things - things that we value - in common.

When I was at Emmanuel College Peter Wyatt - a United Church minister - stepped down as the principle of the college, and the next principle selected was Mark Toulouse - a member of the Disciples of Christ. The United Church already has a

¹ <https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/full-communion-insert-united-church-disciples-christ.pdf>

congregation that is a joint effort of the United Church of Canada and the Disciples of Christ in Winnipeg, called “Broadway Disciples United Church”. This full communion agreement in many ways formalizes how we have already been living. In some ways, it is not really new. But now, it is official.

Full communion - when it works well - can be a wonderful gift to both denominations. Particularly if we reflect on our readings today. From Luke, we have the wonderful story where - right after Jesus performs the first communion service with his friends, an event that we would love to have participated in ourselves, an event that should inspire awe, “A dispute also arose among the disciples as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest”. Immediately after Jesus performs communion, the disciples starting to think about how they could make the most of this for their own personal gain. And in our story from 1 Corinthians, we see evidence that the practice of communion as it developed in the earliest churches included being very divisive in some cases. St. Paul said, “When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord’s supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?”

The idea that communion leads to unity in the church is not based on observation, it is based on hope. Remember that Christianity has something like 33,000 different denominations. The decision that the United Church of Canada and the Disciples of Christ can fully respect each other and work more deeply together is no trivial outcome. It just might be a minor miracle. Today we celebrate that new full communion with the Disciples of Christ. And I hope you can truly feel a deep sense that our faith matters more than religious barriers. Our desire to follow Jesus crosses international boundaries. Our understanding of God is broader than what can be contained within the United Church of Canada. Feel the welcome to new life. Feel the openness. Feel the love.

Now - what about the special feature of this service that you can see? It’s also a visible sign that churches can worship together. That our worship here matters to other people. One of my minister friends was at Wexford Heights United Church in

Scarborough. But that congregation was forced to close its doors last spring. I asked my friend if there was anything we could do to help, and to my surprise, she said yes. She told me that the congregation would be delighted to know that even after they close their doors, their communion chalice would still be used in worship. So today, for the first time, we are using the communion chalice from Wexford Heights United Church. I agreed that we would gladly use their chalice as part of our rotation as a sign that faith continues.

And it just occurred to me now - but there is another special feature of this service that we can feel physically. Because when you come forward for communion in a few moments, you will feel in your hands the glass communion cups also given to us by Wexford Heights. Wexford Heights is helping us achieve our goal of reducing our use of single-use plastic by giving us 100 glass communion cups. I hope you enjoy them.

So is this service special enough now? Communion is a sacrament, after all. Remind me - what is a sacrament again? According to Augustine of Hippo - ok, according to Wikipedia, “Many denominations, including the Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, and Reformed, hold to the definition of sacrament formulated by Augustine of Hippo: an outward sign of an inward grace that has been instituted by Jesus Christ. Sacraments signify God's grace in a way that is outwardly observable to the participant.”²

I hope we have all heard that definition before. But let me ask you something. If that's the definition of sacrament, I wonder why Protestant tradition only recognizes 2 sacraments: communion and baptism. For one thing, the Roman Catholic Church recognizes 7 sacraments: the 2 that we recognize, and also confirmation, reconciliation, anointing the sick, marriage, and holy orders. Surely those are outward signs of inward grace too.

And secondly, why even stop there? If a sacrament is an outward sign of inward grace, surely other actions can also be sacraments too. How about helping a homeless person find a meal? Isn't that an outward sign of inward grace? It is if we act because of grace. How about helping someone for whom English is not their first language navigate

² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacrament>.

our complicated health care system? Isn't that an outward sign of inward grace? How about helping a new person to find their welcome at this church? If it comes from grace, it is a sacrament.

All of those actions - and many more that we can all think of, are outward signs - reflections if you like - of the grace of God within each of us. Like on our bulletin cover where the cross is reflected in the communion wine, in our own lives we see Jesus reflected in normal, everyday activities and experiences.

What is a sacrament? What isn't? Where there is grace, there is love. What more do we need? Go, and be a sacrament in our world.

Amen.