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Communion: Extraordinary? Or extra-ordinary?  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
Oct 4, 2020  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 13:1-17, 31-35

So today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. Well, that seems a like a reasonable, churchy thing to do, right? All Christians celebrate communion after all. Of course we have an annual celebration for that. World Communion Sunday is a reminder that there is a global Christian community. It is also a reminder that we each have our own traditions and that we can learn from each other. But as usual, these celebrations that try to encourage Christian unity also reveal the many ways that Christians do not all see eye to eye.

For one thing, relatively few churches celebrate World Communion Sunday. This is for the simple reasons that globally - most churches celebrate communion every week. Those churches do not really understand this annual event. In this United Church we say that today is a special Sunday when all churches celebrate communion. But if you were in a church that celebrates communion every week you'd probably just be wondering what is wrong with all those other churches. World Communion Sunday is a very North American Protestant idea that dates only back to the 1930's. In spite of it's name, it's not really universal.

However, I still like this annual celebration. Since each of us come from our own traditions, perhaps we can learn from each other about communion. Our different traditions are interesting. And we can learn a lot about our own traditions by reflecting on how other people do things differently.

Now you are all probably expecting me to tell you all about communion, right? Well, yes and no. See, the problem is that many of you have been in church longer than I have. You already know about your own experiences of communion. So I want to start with a pop quiz. Let's see what we all know. And yes, there will be prizes.

If anything I say surprises you, we should talk about it later. And yes, you are allowed to

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disagree with me of course!

Q: Who is allowed to take communion? A: Anyone who wants to. In the UCC we celebrate an “open table” which means anyone can participate. We leave judgement to God. Well, we try to anyway.

Q: Do you have to confess before communion? A: No. However, you get out of communion what you put into it. If you take time to reflect on your life before communion you will find it more meaningful.

Q: How do you receive communion? A: Many options, depending on tradition. On the tongue, wafer, bread, intinction, common cup, spooned, kneeling, standing, etc. Communion pods. Sometimes people are served in their seats and the elements are taken by everyone at the same time. This reinforces the idea that we are one community. Sometimes people come forward to be served. This reinforces the personal reflection and individual nature of communion.

Q: What does the minister have to do during communion. A: Nothing. The minister “administers” communion, meaning that they make sure it is done appropriately. In practice, I create the liturgy and lead the celebration. And I try to make sure that the community and individual aspects of communion are present in the liturgy.

Q: How often should we take communion? A: Never. We do not “take” communion, we open ourselves to receive it. This is not just a word-game. I see communion as a prayer, which is why we hold communion during the Prayers of the People. And prayer is something we open ourselves to.

Q: OK Fine - how often should we receive communion? A: Varies from every day to once a year. In recent history, to remain a member of a United Church you had to participate in communion at least once per year. That was why we used to have communion cards. The

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UCC standard is 5 times / year. Since I've been in ministry I am used to 9 times / year. The standard 5 during Sunday morning worship, and then special events including Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Christmas Eve late service, and a senior's tea and communion event. But I want to suggest that we have the opportunity - right here at SHUC - to celebrate communion every day. I'll explain later.

Q: Do we need to use special bread? A: No. Some churches use unleavened bread, particularly if they are trying to relate communion to passover. Some churches use leavened bread to symbolize the growth of the Christian church. The UCC "standard" is Wonder Bread I think. But it is vitally important that in general we do NOT use special bread.

Q: Do we use wine? A: No. We do not want any barriers to communion for recovering alcoholics. Plus, a fair number of UCC people do not drink alcohol. I think the church has shares in Welch's. Today, since communion is online, you are invited to use whatever liquid makes sense. Feel free to use wine.

Q: What should we say as we receive communion? A: Amen, meaning "so be it", because we are agreeing to be the body of Christ in the world.

Q: What happens to the bread and the wine during communion? A: Nothing. Well, they get eaten.

Q: Sure - but some people believe the bread is changed into the body of Christ. What about that? A: People have lots of traditions that I don't want to argue about. But the UCC understanding of communion is that WE become the body of Christ, not the bread.

Q: What needs to be present to have an appropriate communion? A: You. In the UCC, communion is our collective reminder that we are the body of Christ. Therefore, there is no "private" communion. We celebrate communion within public worship services. For

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pastoral reasons, communion is sometimes celebrated in hospitals, and care homes, or privately too.

[slide: how did you do?]

So - how did you do on the quiz? And if you now expect a prize, that prize is in the form of a surprise - I hope that something came up for you in the quiz that you didn't know. I hope you were surprised by something.

[slide: orthodox mass]

Have you ever wondered why there are so many different traditions around communion? We can perhaps blame the Bible for that. Because the biblical basis for communion is contained in a few short lines. And the gospels do not really agree on those lines. In important ways. As I'm sure you know, there are 4 gospels. 3 of them seem similar - Matthew, Mark and Luke. They are called "synoptics" meaning that they "have the same view". But the gospel of John is strikingly different.

The communion liturgies we normally have use wording based largely on what comes from the synoptics. Very familiar words. During a passover meal, Jesus takes bread, breaks it, offers it to his friends, and asks them to do this in his memory after he is gone. And again, for the wine.

[slide: john's communion]

But in the gospel of John, instead of any reference to bread and wine, we get the texts we read this morning. During a meal, Jesus gets up from the table and starts to wash the disciple's feet. And Jesus goes on to suggest that serving others is the way to act as one of his disciples. Effectively, "serving others" is the communion that we get from John's Jesus.

Traditionally churches have embraced the language from the synoptics for communion involving bread and wine. But in John, communion means service to others. Why is that? Is it perhaps easier to come to church and be given bread rather than going out and serving others? But what if John was right? What if the bread and the wine are not - in and of themselves - important? What if communion means service to others?

And what does "service to others" mean? Do you think it means doing something amazing like developing a cure for COVID-19? Or does "service" include very ordinary

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things, like helping your neighbour. When you hear the phrase “serve others” do you think of something extraordinary? Or do you think of something ordinary?

[hold the bread]

Think about this bread. Jesus used bread and wine because they were already present at the meal he was at. He did not bring them as special items to use. We should not idolize the bread and the wine. What do you think communion would look like if Jesus invented it during a pot-luck church supper today? Perhaps instead of dipping bread into wine we would be dipping chicken fingers into bbq sauce? I hope that communion today is very special for everyone because everyone participating in communion today is using elements that you found yourselves. I hope that you all felt free to use what was at hand, because that's exactly what Jesus did. Jesus used bread and wine because they were ordinary, not extraordinary.

I confess that I like the Catholic idea that the bread is magically transformed into the body of Christ. It's a great idea - that almost works for me. They only missed by a little bit. I prefer the United Church of Canada understanding. Which is that we start with bread, and we do end up with the body of Christ. It's just that it is NOT the bread that becomes the body of Christ.

Are you looking for the body of Christ in this little piece of bread? This is not the body of Christ. And in a few minutes when we celebrate communion, this still will not be the body of Christ. So where is this body of Christ? What do you think? We - as a congregation - are the body of Christ. We - when we come together even online - are the body of Christ. And that is particularly true when we take John's words to heart. We - each of us - is part of the body of Christ when we help others, as we work for the healing of the world, as we act as the hands of Christ in our world.

When you receiving communion you are agreeing to be part of the body of Christ, and that you hope to live out that vision. Every time you help others you are participating in communion. The bread and the wine - and even the minister - do not have to be present. And that is why I said earlier that here at Sydenham-Heritage United Church we celebrate communion far more than 9 times a year. We - many of us - celebrate communion daily through service to others. Thanks be to God.

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By the way - I don't want to scare anyone. We will continue to celebrate communion in traditional ways. And I am honoured to create and lead communion liturgies with you. But at the same time, I encourage you to celebrate daily communion - through service to others.

In communion - in all our sacraments actually - it is theological very important that the elements we use are not special at all. Bread, wine, water. Simple. Basic. They were used because they were readily at hand. John did not baptize Jesus in the Jordan River because it was special. He did it because that's where he lived. The water is not special. The bread is not special.

During a sacrament, we use ordinary elements. And those elements do not change. They remain ordinary. However, those ordinary elements do extraordinary things. Like tap water that remains tap water and yet is used to indicate the presence of the spirit at a baptism. Like wonder bread that remains tasteless and yet reminds us that we are the body of Christ. That bread reminds us that we are not alone. The elements are ordinary. The meaning of the elements is extraordinary. It is theological critical that our sacramental elements are ordinary - not special in any way.

And why is that so important? It's because during communion, we are invited to be and become the body of Christ. Are we special? No! We are ordinary people. We - like bread - are ordinary. And yet we can do extraordinary things, through service to others by helping people know that they are not alone. That's what it means to be the body of Christ.

We do not need to be "special". We do not need to be more educated, or more energetic to contribute to the kingdom of God right here in Brantford. We do not need to be younger, or wealthier, or better looking, or ... anything. We are ordinary and ordinary is just fine. Are you are waiting to become special before you help the world find healing? You will wait forever - and so will the world. Ordinary is fine.

We are the body of Christ. Thanks be to God.

Amen.