
World Communion Sunday
Chapel in the Park United Church
October 5, 2025
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 22:14-27 and John 13:4-9

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. Isn't that exciting? And actually, I do want to know if anyone here finds that exciting. Because in the church we often use very strange words. Or we use words in very strange ways. One of those words is the word "celebrate".

[image: celebrate]

To normal people, a celebration means a party. When children hear the word "celebration" they expect a bouncy castle, balloons, and cake. But here in the church ... the word "celebrate" seems - on the surface - to mean very little.

Because we are always celebrating things during worship. Last week we celebrated the "National Day for Truth and Reconciliation". We celebrate Good Friday. And always with no bouncy castle. No actual celebration.

For me personally, the strangest thing that we "celebrate" is communion. I learned that at seminary actually. When I was at Emmanuel College, students led worship twice every week, and the professors led once per week on Wednesday afternoons. And on one of those Wednesdays I remember "celebrating communion". During the communion service we used lavish words like "we thank God for this abundant feast of joy". And then, we were given tiny pieces of tasteless bread.

But on that particular Wednesday, the worship was followed by a reception. The reception was not connected to the worship in any way. A foreign student who had finished her time at Emmanuel put on an amazing, buffet with vast quantities of wonderful foods from her culture. The student wanted to thank everyone for her great experiences while she had been at Emmanuel so she had laid on this huge spread.

And so when the worship service ended, we left the chapel and walked across the hallway into a room full of delightful sights, smells, and tastes. One student actually exclaimed out loud, "Finally - an actual feast".

I asked ChatGPT to give me a visualization of that story. Here is the result.

[image: communion disappointment]

I have learned that although we often throw the word “celebrate” around in the church, we usually have no expectation of a party.

And I do not blame the church for this. Consider the “last supper” that Jesus shared with his disciples. That last supper is our model for communion, right. And we see little evidence of anyone having a good time.

[image: last supper]

Take our reading from Luke. During the last supper - which is our template for communion - Jesus says words that are familiar to us today. Jesus distributes bread and wine. But what happens almost immediately after that? Almost immediately after that historic event ... the disciples start arguing about which one of them is the greatest.

Is that what an authentic communion should look like? Should we argue with each other as we leave this service today? In fact, that is essentially what all our churches have done for the past 2000 years. We have taken a simple idea like the last supper and turned it into something we fight about. We say that Roman Catholics do it wrong. They say we do it wrong. Which is why I actually do want to celebrate World Communion Sunday today. Because we should not be fighting about communion.

[image: quiz]

Let's start with a pop quiz. Let's see what we all know about communion. And yes, there will be prizes. If anything I say surprises you, we should talk about it later. And you are allowed to 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: What can only the minister 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 do my best to maintain the traditions of this congregation. But I could simply watch other people lead.

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 place communion between the Prayers of the People and the Lord’s Prayer. 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 in the United Church you had to participate in communion at least once per year. That was why we used to have communion cards. The 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, Longest Night, Christmas Eve late service. But I want to suggest that we have the opportunity - right here at Chapel in the Park - to celebrate communion every single day. We will return to that idea 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 grape juice. During the pandemic we celebrated communion online and people were free to drink whatever liquid they preferred.

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 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 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 surprised you.

[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 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. It was also written down much later.

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: footwashing]

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. The communion we get from John’s Jesus is “serving others”.

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 is right? What if the bread and the wine are not - in and of themselves - important? What if communion means service to others? What if communion really means that we become the body of Christ in our world today?

What does “service to others” mean to you? Do you think it means doing something amazing like developing a cure for a disease? Or does “service” include very ordinary 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 bread we would be eating samosas?

One thing I loved about online communion during the pandemic is that it was actually more historically accurate. Because people who were at home had to find their own communion elements. People in their own homes found items to represent the bread and the wine. People used food that was already at hand. And that is exactly what Jesus did. Jesus used bread and wine because they were ordinary, not extraordinary.

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? We - as a congregation - 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 receive 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 do not have to be present. And that is why I said earlier that here at Chapel in the Park United Church we have the option of celebrating communion every single day. We - many of us - celebrate communion daily through service to others. Thanks be to God for that.

I encourage you to celebrate communion every day - through service to others.

Just a reminder. One common definition of a sacrament is “an outward sign of inward grace”. And in Protestant Tradition, we have only two sacraments: baptism and

communion.

But why stop there? If a sacrament is an outward sign of inward grace, surely other actions can be sacraments too. How about helping a homeless person find a meal? Is that not 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 our complicated health care system? Isn't that an outward sign of inward grace? 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 in our own lives when we see Jesus reflected in normal, everyday activities and experiences.

Where there is grace, there is love. What more do we need? And that question is not rhetorical. I have heard many people tell me that they are not special enough to do those things. So let me be clear.

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 and the wine are not special.

During a sacrament, we use ordinary elements. And those elements are not changed. 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 are ordinary - like bread. 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 where we live. We do not need to be younger, or wealthier, or better looking, or ... anything. We are ordinary and ordinary is just fine. Are you waiting to become special before you help the world find healing? You will wait forever - and so will the world. But there is no need to wait. Ordinary is fine.

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

Amen.