
Set the Table
Chapel in the Park United Church
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Psalm 23 and 1 Corinthians 11:17-26

Do you ever come to church expecting a really boring service? Because I confess that I am sometimes underwhelmed by some of the celebrations we have in the church. I mean church in general - not here of course. For some of these celebrations, it's not that I disagree with the basic message. It's just that my own experience is that some topics seem to invite bland, boring, sermons that require very little mental engagement. For both the listener and the speaker! Some topics just seem to scream out for greeting card level quotes and platitudes. And you can go to a stationary store for those. I like to imagine that in the church, we can do better than that.

So I will be honest with you and confess that when I became a minister in the United Church I struggled - in my early days - to appreciate World Communion Sunday.

I had 2 big problems with the idea. 1 problem that happens in the church, and one that happens outside the church.

My problem inside the church is I could not understand why - for 1 hour each year - we act like we are on the same page as Christian sisters and brothers from other denominations. But then, when that hour is over, we go right back to being suspicious of each other again.

My problem outside the church was when I spoke with clergy from other denominations. And I asked them what they do to celebrate World Communion Sunday. And most of them just gave me a blank stare. Some churches celebrate communion every week, and cannot make sense of the idea that we should all celebrate communion today. Because they were going to do that anyway.

When I was younger, I did not understand any of these issues. World Communion Sunday was just a nice warm fuzzy for me. But - as so often happens - when we learn a bit of history, these celebrations reveal much deeper meaning. Much deeper than just warm fuzzies. The history of World Communion Sunday is actually interesting - at least

to a church geek like me. But today I hope it interests us all because that history is still with us today. But I'm getting ahead of myself here.

And to be clear, different Christian denominations have different understandings of what communion is, and what it means, and what it should look like. We differ in lots of ways. I do not want to gloss over those differences. I think we should acknowledge those differences and to learn what we can from each other. Instead of just pretending that we all agree. Even for 1 hour every year.

For example. We might say that communion includes bread and wine. But we all know it is not that simple. In the United Church of Canada there is a long-standing tradition of using grape juice instead of wine - so as to not create any barriers for recovering alcoholics. Here at Chapel in the Park we often just use the grapes themselves. But you will still hear the word "wine" in our liturgy today.

The bread is not a simple matter either. Some traditions use unleavened bread - to connect the ritual to Passover. Some traditions use leavened bread - to connect the ritual to the early growth of the Christian Church. Some traditions use whatever bread is available. In some traditions, the bread is said to become - physically - the body of Christ after it is blessed. A process called transubstantiation. Here, in the United Church of Canada, we say that we - the collective congregation - become the body of Christ, not the bread.

Two important differences involve the people in the room. Specifically, who is allowed to lead communion? And who is allowed to participate in communion? In some denominations, only ordained clergy can lead. Here, you expect your minister to lead, of course. But lay people can lead communion in the United Church if they have been licensed to do so. In some traditions, you cannot participate in communion unless you are an active member of the congregation. Here, we practice an "open table". Which means that everyone can come to this table. Actually, there is one requirement to come to this table. Only one requirement. And that requirement is this - that you want to come to the table. We see communion as something between you and God. We are not here to judge you.

The United Church is sometimes criticized for our "open table" position. In many

churches, communion involves some sort of denominational purity test. Like you have to be one of “us” to be welcome at the table. Or there are other barriers. I was confirmed in the Anglican Church, and we were not allowed to participate in communion before we were confirmed. Churches have lots of rules like that. But ... at the last supper even Judas was welcome at the table. Jesus knew that Judas was about to betray him. Judas was still welcome at the table. And so everyone is welcome at this table.

The reality is that there is no single, agreed upon ritual that the Global Christian community calls “communion”. And I’m not even going to get into the distinction between communion and mass. There are many tables. Not one. These tables are set differently and for different purposes. Our reading from 1 Corinthians revealed massive differences in the understanding of communion - and that was within a single congregation. Communion has always meant different things to different people. And that’s ok.

Each denomination forged it’s own understanding of the methods and meaning of communion from good intentions. They arrived at their own interpretation after careful and prayerful consideration of the life and ministry of Jesus. The rituals themselves are different. And that’s ok.

And I do not want to blame Jesus for this. I actually want to credit Jesus for this. Jesus set the stage for this variety himself. Communion in the church is based on the last supper that Jesus celebrated with his friends. According to the gospels, Jesus created this ritual - and laid it out for his friends - only once.

And that event that we call the “last supper” was an evening of confusion and anxiety. As Jesus announced that some friends would betray him. As the disciples feared being raided by Roman soldiers. Tensions were high. And in the middle of that confusion, Jesus drops a new tradition on people. According to the Gospels, he does not even announce it. Jesus does not say, “now pay attention, because I’m going to show you something you will want to immortalize later”. Jesus does not say, “Someone should write this down because otherwise you will disagree about the details later.”

Which is why the stories of the last supper we find in the Bible are not all the same. Different authors heard different emphases. In the gospel of John communion

includes foot-washing, as one example. And likewise, different denominations have interpreted the meaning of communion in different ways. If Jesus had wanted to create a fixed tradition that would be followed in exactly the same way for 2000 years, he would have written it down. Or led his friends through the ritual more than once so they could get the hang of it. Jesus could have trained the disciples to do communion “properly”. But Jesus did not do that. Perhaps Jesus was not trying to create a ritual that was set in stone. Perhaps Jesus aspired for more than just that.

Jesus created (actually, he repurposed an existing) ritual into a new ritual in a way that was organic and met the moment. Communion was not given to us - shrink-wrapped - in it's final form by Jesus. It was meant to convey meaning in ways that can change and grow to meet our needs. So it should be no surprise that different Christian denominations have different understandings of what communion means, and how to perform it.

World Communion Sunday is not an invitation to pretend that we all agree on communion. It is something far better than that. Far more powerful than that. We need a bit of history now.

What we today call “World Communion Sunday” started with a small but understandable aspiration. In 1933, a Presbyterian minister in Pittsburgh felt the need for local Presbyterian congregations to come together for mutual support. The call was for all the local-area Presbyterian churches to celebrate communion on the same day - and to declare that intention. 1933 is the date given for the start of World Communion Sunday - even though it was a very local event that only happened within the Presbyterian Church.

But by 1940 - it had grown into something larger. And to understand that, we need to put our minds back to 1940. What was going on in 1940?

The Second World War was happening. The Nazis had conquered much of Western Europe. The Battle of Britain was in progress. But beyond that, there was a global rise in far-right authoritarian regimes. Segregation and civil rights were ongoing issues here in the West. And economically, many people - especially poor people - were still recovering from the Great Depression.

In 1940, the idea of shared communion spread beyond the Presbyterian church. It

was a larger Christian response to those social issues. Those churches in 1940 had very little control over anything. They could not stop the war. They could not erase the lingering effects of the depression. They could not snap their fingers and make segregation and racism disappear.

So these churches did a thing that they could actually do. They set the table. And they invited all churches to do the same. With intention. And the Christian community declared that it meant something that mattered.

World Communion Sunday was never designed as a cure. It was in fact an act of resistance. The world was coming apart at the seams in lots of ways, and the church responded by declaring - we can set the table.

The action of coming together at many communion tables in 1940 did not “fix” the underlying problems. The war was going to get worse before it got better. Sharing bread did not stop bullets, or poverty, or racism.

But that was the point. Because it was a resistance. And acts of resistance essentially just declare that the powers of evil do not get the final word. As we read in Psalm 23, “God prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies”. In other words, the table was set while the enemy was there. Still watching. Still a threat. It’s not that God will prepare the table after the enemies are gone. God prepares the table in spite of the presence of these enemies.” That is an act of resistance.

Which takes us back to the original last supper. Jesus declared that this would be his last meal with his friends. Jesus knew that some of his friends would betray him. Jesus knew that the power of Rome was about to intercede and to put an end to his ministry and his life. And in response to that, Jesus set the table.

The last supper did not stop the betrayals. It did not stop the Roman soldiers. It did not stop the upcoming crucifixion. The last supper was a declaration that evil does not get the final word. The last supper was an act of resistance.

Some of the social concerns I named in 1940 may feel familiar to us today. Rising authoritarianism. The affordability crisis. A resurgence of racism on our own streets. I hear from people all the time who say that our own society is coming apart at the seams. Again. I’m not saying that it’s the same as it was back in 1940. But we certainly hear and

feel echos from that fractured and divisive past.

And what is our collective response today? We can set the table. We have a table. We have helping hands. We have people here willing to eat and be with each other in spite of our own differences. We can set the table. And we can share that table. Nothing can take that away from us.

And that is not nothing. That has never been nothing. The original last supper was not nothing. It was an act of resistance. And resistance always matters.

This instinct is not only Christian of course. All humans have an instinct that says that when things are hard, we do not eat alone. We set the table. We invite. We hand something to the person sitting beside us. That human instinct is very old. It is wide. It shows up in every culture on earth. In Christianity, it shows up in communion. It shows up at other tables too - like our International Luncheon or at a Thanksgiving meal. But communion is our formal acknowledgement that evil does not get the final word.

World Communion Sunday is not a failed dream because there are important differences in how the ritual of communion is constructed. World Communion Sunday is meaningful and perhaps even powerful because - in spite of our differences - we still set the table. We live into the very human instinct to gather together at table when the world outside is not gathering at all.

You and I are invited into this continuing ritual today. We will all soon be invited to come to this table. Or if you are online, a different table. But please - do not come because you think we have the one-and-only shrink-wrapped version of what communion looks like. Come because it is an act of resistance. Come because evil does not have the final word - unless we let that happen. Come, because the table is set.

Amen.