

## ***Bread of Heaven***

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion  
on the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Eastertide

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

May 6, 2018

Text: John 6:22-35

Communion, Holy Communion, the Sacrament of Communion, the Eucharist – these are different names for a sacred ritual that is a sacrament for most Christians around the world. Theologies of Communion fill volumes in divinity school and seminary libraries. What it means, what it is composed of, who prepares it and how it is prepared, who can partake of it and what forms that participation can take – these are all important questions, each with their own detailed and nuanced answers grounded in the particular Christian tradition within which the sacrament is being observed. In other words, Communion can get really complicated really fast. Or not. And that’s what makes it so very fascinating and so very central to Christian faith and practice now and down through the centuries.

I have very vivid memories of Communion going back to my earliest days in the church. I remember sitting between my mother and my grandmother in the little Presbyterian church where I grew up as the Communion trays were passed, reverently and carefully from one adult to the next. Children were NOT allowed even to touch the trays. Of course, that meant I was just

dying for a taste. But nothing doing. I took Communion for the first time when I joined the church as an adult on Maundy Thursday the year I turned 15. I was so excited to finally be let in on the secret of Communion! I had read the study books. I knew what it meant and I was convinced something spectacular must accompany that first time the elements are tasted. Well, the heavens didn't split open and no voice thundered out from the sky but there was still something very special about that moment for me. The juice was just juice – grape juice mixed with water actually. But the bread, that was something else again. It was sweet – like little tiny sweet bread pillows that literally melted in your mouth. When we got home I asked Mom where they got that amazing bread but she didn't know. I have never again tasted Communion bread like the bread served in that little church but I have never forgotten its sweet, sweet taste.

My next memory of Communion came in adulthood when I was denied Communion by the Catholic Church because I wasn't Catholic. Before Peter converted to Protestantism, I often went to Mass with him and, of course, I never took Communion although being excluded never felt right or good. Eventually the reality that we could never take Communion together was a factor in Peter's decision to join my church which by then was the United Church of Christ. Our children were both baptized and confirmed in the United Church of Christ. What we came to think of as our second-

class status in the Catholic Church slipped into the background of our awareness as we only attended mass with Peter's mother a few times a year. Reality came crashing in on us, though, when Peter's mother died and we went to Maryland for her funeral mass. Of course, we had no expectations of partaking in Communion but that didn't stop the officiating priest from stationing an usher at our pew to prevent us from approaching the altar. He came over and leaned in to us, saying softly "you will not be taking Communion." We were horrified and hurt, especially my children who felt this was an unnecessary insult to them at a time when they were grieving the loss of their beloved Nana.

That priest, we learned a year later, was eventually removed from that pulpit because we were not the only family to be treated so unkindly at funerals and someone complained to the Bishop. Perhaps you have had similar experiences when attending a Catholic funeral or wedding and have been totally confused as to why their rules for partaking Communion are so rigid when ours are so loose. Well, there are very specific reasons for those differences and all of them are theological. To understand them, we must first take a moment to consider the four main theological understandings of Communion in the Christian tradition. Apologies in advance for some of the theological terms we'll be discussing for a few moments but they really are key to understanding the nuances of this sacrament.

First, Communion is an example of *anamnesis* which is a recalling or remembering as specifically possible an action of Jesus. In the United Church of Christ, we believe this happens in both the Word – meaning preaching and Scripture reading – as well as in sacrament such as Communion and Baptism. In the Roman Catholic tradition over the millennia, the focus for a thousand years was only on *anamnesis* in the sacraments, especially Communion. Preaching and Scripture reading were quite secondary and remained so until the Protestant Reformation changed the rules of the game. The Protestants emphasized the Word – *sola Scriptura* – the Word alone. Only two sacraments were retained, baptism and Communion specifically because of their *anamnesis* – their direct connection to Christ while he lived. As the Reformation took hold, the Catholics realized they needed to do more with Scripture and preaching and gradually, very gradually, the Protestants realized they needed to do a better job with the two sacraments they had retained. The challenge was that the Protestants were not a monolithic lot. Almost before the ink on Luther's 95 Theses was dry, the Protestant movement splintered and it has been splintering ever since. The differences between various Protestant traditions can and does fill volumes and is way beyond the scope of this sermon. However, I do think it will be helpful for us to understand the four basic theologies or understandings of Communion.

The Roman Catholics believe that the elements of Communion – the bread and in their case wine – actually become the physical body and blood of Christ at the time of consecration. This is called *transubstantiation*. If you've been to a mass, that precise moment when the bread and wine become the actual body and blood of Christ is when the altar boy rings the bells. That mystical moment when the elements morph from one thing to another is also why only Catholics who have received the proper instruction or *catechesis* are permitted to receive Communion. In other words, if you don't get it, you can't have it. The Lutherans, and also the Episcopalians, believe in *consubstantiation* which is similar to the Catholic belief but stops short of the elements becoming the actual body and blood of Jesus. Rather, they believe that Jesus is somehow present in the elements but they do not become his actually physical body and blood. In the Reformed Protestant tradition – that's us – we believe Christ is spiritually present in the entire celebration of the sacrament and therefore we are spiritually nourished by the elements themselves but they do not contain Christ mystically or physically. Finally, in a small percentage of offshoot groups from the Reformed tradition, they believe that Communion is only a symbolic re-enactment of the Last Supper and nothing more.

So, there you have it. Clearly, Christians from different traditions have very different views on and understandings of the

sacrament of Communion. In a way, that's not surprising since one of the realities of Christian faith and practice is that it, like the humans who practice it, are always changing as life circumstances change. For example, the world is a very different place now than it was when I was that little girl wishing so desperately to take Communion. The church has changed along with the times so that now in our church, and in most mainline Protestant churches, the rules about the age at which children can receive Communion have become very flexible. What hasn't changed is what all the Christian traditions have in common when it comes to Communion. All Christians believe that Communion is a memorial of Christ during which the bread and wine (or new wine in our case, unfermented juice) are consecrated on the altar.

But, we also have more in common than just this. All Christians also see in Communion a call to action on behalf of Christ and as a result of Christ's teachings. All Christians believe that, like those disciples who gathered with Jesus at the Last Supper, Jesus is counting on us to keep his teachings about God and how God wants us to live our lives alive and moving forward through history. In other words, all Christians believe that Communion is not simply receiving a little bit of food and drink as a spur to reflection and prayer although that is certainly what it is in the moment. The thing is, Communion is also a call to action to each of us from Jesus himself – a call to live as one who follows

him every day by loving God with all that we are and all that we have and loving the others we encounter as much as we love ourselves. Communion is always a reminder of who we are, who we profess and how that impacts our lives each day.

Often, though, this is not what Communion is for us as we sit here on a Sunday morning or the occasional holiday evening. For us, it is a moment of solace and comfort in frantic, busy lives. It is a time when we allow ourselves to feel Jesus close to us, caring for us, literally feeding us as we open our hearts and minds to his guiding presence. And that, dear friends, is simply wonderful. I know that makes Jesus happy, if that is how you feel as you rest in his presence during Communion. But, if all you feel during Communion is sort of numb because you're not thinking about anything during those few fleeting moments, that's fine too, because that's what you need. All I am suggesting to you, reminding you of, is that Communion is not only that and it was never intended to be only that. That's not surprising really because Jesus was a spiritual, faithful man who literally brought God to life but that's not all he was. He was always a man of action. That's what he's really saying to the disciples during the Last Supper – you have more work to do and more places to go so here's what I'm giving you to keep you going. Remember me, always, whenever you eat and drink in this way and as you

remember me, you will find what you need to keep going in the work I need you to do.

Bread of heaven. Not a new concept in Jesus' time as the text we read from John reminds us. This story takes place on the day after Jesus fed the 5000 with loaves and fishes. The people come back looking for him the next day and Jesus calls them out for just wanting more food, missing the whole point of what he was trying to teach them through his miracle. They argued back – but what will you do to convince us you are from God? Moses gave us the manna, the bread from heaven. What will you do? Jesus replied, Moses didn't give you the manna, God did. But even that bread, Jesus said, isn't like the bread I can give you. The bread of heaven I give is bread that gives life to the world through the works of God. I am that bread, Jesus said. And the people didn't get it. Sometimes we don't get it either. But that's the real beauty and power of Communion if we open our minds and hearts to receive it. All we need to do to receive the new life Jesus offers us through the sacraments is just that – receive them. A visible sign of an invisible presence in our lives. The waters of baptism. The food and drink of Communion. The basic elements of new life in Christ – ours to receive and to share with others. How amazing is that!! Amen.