

Sacramental Memory

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on World Communion Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
October 3, 2021 ~~ Dedication of the new Cross Window
Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

What an exciting Sunday in the life of our church! Our spectacular newly redone Cross Window is being dedicated this morning in memory of two of the saints of this church, two women who are part of history here every bit as much as the window is. You will hear more about these two remarkable women, Becky Morrone and Connie Hill, from a few of their friends in a bit. And I have to tell you, every time I walk through the sanctuary now – which I find reason to do often – I imagine these two lovely ladies smiling at this fitting tribute to their legacies in this church.

But before we move on to remembering these two ladies, I want us to pause and remember another important legacy to us that we celebrate this day. I am talking about this Sunday, the first Sunday in October, as the Sunday when we remind ourselves of Jesus' legacy to us which comes in the form of Holy Communion every time we celebrate this sacrament together. What makes the first Sunday in October so special is that on this particular Sunday, we pause to remind ourselves of the Christians all over the world who will partake in this sacrament at some point during this 24 hour period of time. Just imagine! Somewhere in the world someone is receiving Communion, celebrating our common legacy as followers of the Risen Christ, every hour of this day. Folks on the Isle of Iona whose worship resources we used this morning celebrated Communion five hours ago when we were still snoozing away. Folks on the other side of our own country, in Seattle for example, won't be in church for the sacrament for at least another 3 hours. In Japan folks were gathered around the Communion table on Sunday morning while we were watching our favorite TV shows last evening. Every hour, all around the world, people are receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion and I for one think that is something really, really wonderful. Somehow it makes the world smaller, and more personal that all these strangers are really our friends in Christ.

We need to remember, however, that not everyone is receiving the sacrament in the same way. Communion practices differ widely between denominations within Protestantism and certainly there are substantive differences between how we understand Communion and our brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church do. None of us could even receive Communion in a Catholic Church and, even if we welcomed a Catholic to commune with us, they would do so without the approval of their church. Strange to think about, isn't it? Even as we pause this day to celebrate our commonality in Jesus, we are forced to keep in mind those things which continue to separate us. This is where it's important to remember that the beliefs and practices which separate Christians from each other do not come from God. Not ever. Those differences are strictly a human invention. Or perhaps a better word would be intervention. Humans managed to intervene between what Jesus originally intended and what we humans have done to that sacred experience. On that long ago night Jesus first instituted Communion as a sacred act intended to bind his followers together in a common memory and experience rooted in the everyday items of bread and wine. Over the centuries, that common memory and experience have been overshadowed by layers and layers of theological argument, ritual practice and even disputes over who should and should not receive the sacrament.

So where do we find our commonality as followers of the Risen Christ on this World Communion Sunday? I would argue that we find it in the text we read this morning from 1st Corinthians. This text is where Paul is explaining what Communion is to the people he is ministering to in the city of Corinth. Again, we have his words to them in a letter and he appears to be explaining to them what Communion is and was intended by Jesus to be. He talks about receiving this understanding of the sacrament directly from Jesus himself. We have to wonder how this happened since he was most assuredly not in that Upper Room at that last supper Jesus celebrated with his disciples. But that is really not the point of this text. In fact, the point is exactly the opposite – that Paul is not remembering his own personal experience. He is, in fact, sharing a remembrance of this experience he

received, perhaps directly from Jesus himself during his conversion experience on the road to Damascus. Or perhaps Paul's knowledge of Communion came to him through his experiences through the many small groups of Christ's followers who banded together in the months and years after Jesus had left them.

After all, we know that the story of how this special meal was celebrated amongst Jesus' first followers is repeated in the Gospels. We know it did what Jesus hoped it would do in those fledgling churches – it helped them to remember what they experienced with and learned from Jesus. It bound them together. Paul's words about the sacrament are the next step in this legacy we have inherited as followers of Jesus. Paul is the one who first taught people in foreign lands what Communion was and why it mattered. Paul distilled this extraordinary moment in time down to just a few simple sentences. It is those sentences which are his living legacy to us in that it is Paul's words that form the basis of the liturgy for Communion that all Christians in every corner of the globe use as part of the celebration of the liturgy. Through Paul's words we are reminded that Communion is a remembrance of an actual event so powerful and extraordinary that it changes lives through this physical act of remembrance using tangibles of bread and new wine. Paul reminds us very directly that Communion itself is our legacy – our remembered and revered heritage – as followers of the Risen Christ.

So, with this in mind, what better way to celebrate this World Communion Sunday than with the dedication of this incredible Cross Window to these two incredible women who were and remain saints of this church. Becky and Connie both touched my life and ministry here in ways too numerous to mention. But even more importantly they touched my heart and in that they helped me become the pastor I am today – your pastor of your church, and theirs. Rev. Amy Carter says the same of both of them and shared these thoughts with me just last evening: “Connie's gentle loving spirit touched me deeply and Becky's deep and abiding faith never failed to inspire me. Both made me a better pastor and Christian, for that I

am ever grateful.” I am confident every pastor who has ever served here would feel the same.

But it’s not just pastors who loved these ladies! This is why I thought it only appropriate to invite a few of the ladies of this church who knew Becky and Connie far better than I to say a few words about these dear friends too soon gone from our midst.

Carolyn LeRoy

Sally Panciera

Linda Evans

Others?

Now, dear friends, with these wonderful stories and memories in our minds and hearts, let’s proceed with the dedication of our beautiful new Cross Window. ...