

All God's Children

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
October 2, 2022 – Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY CELEBRATING ALL GOD'S CREATURES!
Text: Galatians 3:26-29

World Communion Sunday is one of the few special Sundays I remember being observed in the small Presbyterian Church where I grew up. We observed all the biggies – Christmas and Christmas Eve of course, plus Easter Sunday and Maundy Thursday. I have some vague memories around Thanksgiving too. But that was pretty much it in terms of special observances. The Presbyterian Church of my youth was, shall we say, not as liturgically aware as its churches are today. That and the fact that my little church only observed the Sacrament of Communion four times a year – Christmas Eve, Maundy Thursday, World Communion Sunday and maybe the first Sunday in Lent. Now wonder World Communion Sunday was such a stand-out to me in the little church of my youth.

I don't remember the liturgy that day being any different than it was on other Communion occasions. I do remember singing "In Christ There Is No East or West." And I vividly remember the unique Communion bread the little church served that I have never had anywhere else. Nothing has even come close to the little pillows of sweet doughy goodness that were Communion wafers in that church. I have no idea where they came from. My best guess is that someone in the church made them, maybe the Deacons? But they were amazing. Perhaps the unique taste I recall is just a trick of memory since I was strictly prohibited from taking Communion until I joined the church as an adult, which I did at the age of 16. So, as I think about it, I probably only received Communion in that little church a handful of times since I left home for college at 17 and returned home only briefly before marrying and building my own life immediately

after graduation. But I still remember those incredible bites of holy bread that were my gateway to the sweetness of Communion celebrations of all sorts which followed throughout my life. Looking back, I wish I had been welcomed at the Table sooner than I was in that little church.

The United Church of Christ led the way in the practice of including children at the Lord's Table for Communion. That whole debate popped up in the first years of my ministry and I was an early supporter of it. Hard to imagine now what a hot button issue it actually was. Arguments in Deacons meetings, church governing boards and even larger church gatherings laid bare the central issue of how young was too young for children to receive Communion. The need to be able to understand its significance was often the primary reason given, as if intellectual and rational thought have anything to do with the practice of any sacrament. Hint: It doesn't. By definition a sacrament is an outward sign of an invisible grace. If I asked any of you here this morning, or joining us online, to explain what that sentence means to everyone else, could you do it? More importantly, would you want to? I doubt it. So why should children have to pass some test that adults themselves most likely could not?

For me, the sacrament of Communion has always been a tangible experience (that's the outward sign part) of what it means to love and be loved by Jesus (that's the invisible grace part). In other words, the bread and wine, or crackers and juice, or whatever the elements are in a particular place, are a reminder that we belong to Jesus. Each time we "partake" (the church word for drinking the juice and eating the bread), we are remembering Jesus' final meal with his disciples and what he intended it to be. To us in this church, Communion is therefore a means of nourishing ourselves literally and refreshing

ourselves spiritually as we strive to love and follow Jesus and his example of servant leadership.

Now that we've reminded ourselves of what Communion is and why it's so important to us in our church, what's the deal with World Communion Sunday? As I did some reading on it, I discovered some interesting facts I did not know. First, it's not that old of an observance, dating back to 1933 in, of all places, Pittsburgh, PA, my hometown. It was the brainchild of the pastor of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church, a large gothic looking church in one of the more affluent neighborhoods of the city. Rev. Hugh Thompson Kerr, the church pastor, came up with the idea which "promotes Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation."¹ Even more surprising was learning that the whole idea of World Communion Sunday came out of what was referred to as the "Stewardship Division" or the Stewardship Committee of that local Presbyterian church. That group's original vision was for a Sunday celebration that would bring churches together in a service of Christian unity—in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another.²

The Shadyside Presbyterian Church brought the idea to the Presbyterian General Assembly (like Synod for us) in 1936 where it was adopted for use throughout the denomination. Then, in 1940, the National Council of Churches and later the World Council of Churches promoted its adoption here and around the world as a response to the gathering clouds of international conflict soon to result in World War II. No wonder World Communion Sunday is one I remember from my childhood! Until my research for this sermon uncovered this little

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Communion_Sunday

² Ibid.

factoid, I never knew I shared a birthplace with World Communion Sunday! In these scary days of international tensions in our own lives, we can appreciate that World Communion Sunday was first envisioned in the aftermath of one World War, coming into common observance as a second World War began. How extraordinary it is that a group of stuffy old white men (I can say this – I grew up in this kind of church and I know who would have been on the Stewardship Board!) gathered around a conference table in a Presbyterian church saw the sacrament of Communion as a means of pointing the war weary world to peace. They dared to imagine the churches of the world coming together around a common celebration of Jesus' last meal with his disciples as a means of nourishing the notion of peace, one Communion wafer at a time.

Even more extraordinary is that this idea has worked even though many of the Christian denominations which participate have very different understandings of Communion. The Methodists, the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists, the Disciples of Christ, the Lutherans – we all have slightly different takes on the particulars of the “outward sign of an invisible grace” we celebrate at our respective Communion tables. Using wine or juice is one biggie. Then there's what type of bread and even how is it cut. Do folks come forward to receive or do they pass the elements to each other as we did in pre-Covid days? What words do we use in the liturgy and how often is the sacrament practiced? All of these were and are real questions but – guess what – as we celebrate World Communion Sunday, they just don't matter. What matters is the common table, the common remembrance of Jesus and the disciples, the common commitment to live as followers of Jesus.

The text we read this morning from the book of Galatians is not a typical one chosen for World Communion Sunday and yet it seems

incredibly appropriate to me. The Apostle Paul was writing these words to the church he founded in the Roman province of Galatia. The people in the group were arguing about who could belong to the church. Some strongly felt that, since Jesus was Jewish one had to be Jewish in order to be part of the church. Others, Paul among them, was confident that Jesus never intended to create an exclusive community of “insiders” with a fast route to God. This is what he is talking about when he writes, “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.” In other words, if you believe in Jesus and seek to follow him, that’s all that is required to join the church and come to the Table. Everyone has equal access to God because God created all as God’s own children. Paul goes into even more detail: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” All of you are one in Christ Jesus. That’s it. That’s all. And that’s what World Communion Sunday celebrates.

This year, though, we’re not going to stop there on World Communion Sunday because we’re also using this as an opportunity to do a sort of virtual Blessing of the Animals. This tradition dates back to the 13th century and St. Francis of Assisi who is known for many things, including as patron saint of animals. St. Francis is probably one saint even non-Catholics are familiar with since his statues are common in gardens, usually with a bird in one hand and animals gathered around his feet. Legend has it that St. Francis even preached to the birds who listened intently to every word!³ The feast day of St. Francis of Assisi is October 4 putting it in direct calendar conflict with World Communion Sunday observations on the first Sunday in October. This is one reason why we have not done too many Blessings of the Animals during my tenure here. Well, that and

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_of_Assisi

the concerns about critters in the sanctuary. But this year, I decided – what the heck! Let’s try to combine the two and here we are.

Honestly, I had no idea how I would combine the two, or even if we should. Then I did some reading on St. Francis and guess what. Among his many, many accomplishments – including the founding of the Franciscan order of monks and nuns still flourishing today – St. Francis was most known for his devotion to the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Communion. ⁴ He understood the sacrament as the means by which God becomes part of a person, influencing every aspect of their lives. Francis believed that it was possible for anyone to follow Jesus by living simply and following Jesus’ teachings to love God and love the other, even taking this to the extreme of loving all God’s creatures equally for the simple reason that God created them and loved them first. That’s why I think Francis would be thrilled that we have celebrated this World Communion Sunday by sharing in the sacrament together and then pausing to ask for special blessings for the animals we love who so enrich our lives each day. Like Paul, Francis believed and preached that we are all God’s children. No matter who we are or where we live. No matter how we look or what language we speak. No matter how much money we have or don’t have. No matter if we have four paws or two feet or multiple fins or feathers. We are all God’s Creation, beloved and cherished. We humans especially are also called to Christ’s Table to remember who and whose we are and to be nourished for the work God needs us to do. And in this church, we appreciate that a big part of that work is caring for all God’s creatures, down to the tiniest insect. Bees and bumbling humans matter just the same to God. How miraculous is that? Thanks be to our amazing God. Amen.

⁴ Ibid.

