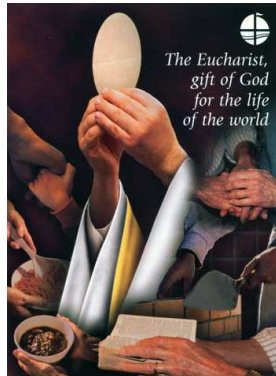


Communion AND Community

1 Corinthians 11: 17 - 26

Newtonbrook United Church - February 1, 2009



This morning we continue our "Aspects of Worship" series. Today's topic for the sermon, and discussion period in the Fellowship Room afterwards, is "communion."

I understand that several people here have raised questions about communion, and our communion customs, here at Newtonbrook United Church.

- Why do we have intinction, rather than serving communion in the pews?
- Why do we share communion so often - or why don't we share it more often?
- What does communion really mean?

Possibly you have other questions to ask - and that's why we have discussion times set up for after worship AND tomorrow evening.

I cannot promise to answer all of your questions or to clarify the mystery of this Christian sacrament. I suspect that you want to go home before the Taiwanese congregation arrives this afternoon for their worship service at 2:30 pm. There are stacks of books on this topic - OR we could set up a Small Group study series for those who are interested.

The title is "Communion AND Community." That's because both words come from the same Latin word "*communis*", meaning "**common**." There is no communion without community - we never celebrate communion alone; we always do it in community with others AND with God. Although we at Newtonbrook have had a practice of taking bread and wine to people who cannot be present for Sunday morning communion services, that is considered to be an extension of our worship - NOT a separate service.

Communion is a symbolic act that I understand is one way of saying that we are all together in this household as God's children AND that we are all equal to one another. Nobody gets better bread or wine at the table than anyone else! The

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bread and wine are available to all on an equal basis - these things we share in COMMON.

Communion also means THANKSGIVING. Another name for communion is "Eucharist", a term used in some other Christian denominations. Eucharist comes from a Greek word that means "thanksgiving". In communion, we give thanks to God for the gifts that God has shared with us, beginning with the gift of life. In the Eucharistic prayer we thank God for God's grace, and God's saving acts that are recorded in the scriptures.

Of course, that Eucharistic Prayer - the words that are said before the bread is broken and the wine is poured - takes many forms. There are eleven communion prayers that the United Church of Canada has published in its basic manual of liturgies for worship. In the classic, liturgically correct Communion Prayer there are also eleven different elements to each of these prayers.

I wonder why we need these long, liturgically correct communion prayers? After all, in 1932 the United Church Book of Common Order defined only four mandatory elements that are based upon the actions of Jesus in the Upper Room. Jesus TOOK bread, BLESSED it, BROKE it, and SHARED it.

A few minutes ago Shari read the first recorded communion prayer in our scriptures. This was recorded in the Book of Corinthians. It was simple. It was profound. I am recalling that Jesus said we are not to "*heap up empty phrases*" in our prayers¹

José Comblin has written that;

*"Christianity is always in need of re-simplifying, going back to its origins, ridding itself of the excessive superstructure it has accumulated through history"*². I think that long communion prayers are a part of that excess. I agree with Rev. Chris Levan when he writes:

*"Long, pretentious sentences and eternally pious petitions will not be regarded with any special attention by the God of Jesus."*³

¹ Matthew 6:7

² Sojourners (online) August 11, 2008

³ Levan, God Hates Religion, page 137

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Now that the United Church liturgy police will be after me - let me continue with an answer to some of the "Why" questions that were raised up earlier.

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- Why do we have intinction, rather than serving communion in the pews with individual glasses and pieces of bread?
- Why do we share communion so often - or why don't we share it more often?

The short answer is because this community has decided that you want to share communion in this way.

The longer answer is a reminder that each congregation in the United Church of Canada is responsible for its own worship practices.

In 1926, a year after our founding as a church, a book called Forms of Service was published that affirmed the freedom of the uniting traditions and their local congregations. *"Diversity has been a part of our liturgical heritage from the beginning."*⁴

In 1932 the United Church published a "Book of Common Order". In true United Church fashion, it offered two "directories" for Sunday worship, in an attempt to create some unity within the new church, AND ALSO recognizing the principle of "ordered liberty" that might allow congregations to follow the Spirit of Christ in their midst.

In 1969 the United Church published a "Service Book" with a green cover - and some of you may remember using that book. In the Introduction to that book you will read that:

*"In the United Church of Canada there are no prescribed forms of worship, except part of the ordination service."*⁵

In 1988 three professors at Emmanuel College published what they called a "Guide to Sunday Worship", acknowledging that there is a diversity of worship practices in our United Church.⁶

⁴ Celebrate God's Presence, page 2

⁵ Service Book for the use of the people, 1969, Introduction

⁶ See pages 1 - 10, Guide to Sunday Worship, for discussion of the diversity of worship practices.

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Because congregations control worship practices in the United Church of Canada, communion practices differ from congregation to congregation. For example, our visit to Northminster last week showed that our orders of worship are similar, but different.

The sharing of the Peace of Christ is another example of our United Church diversity. This practice is recorded as entering the United Church in 1969.⁷ Some congregations never participate in this ritual. Some share "The Peace" only when communion is shared. Others share "The Peace" weekly.

Why do we share communion almost monthly here at Newtonbrook? The short answer is that your Worship Committee has responded to your requests to do so.

You are aware that in some denominations of the Christian faith - such as Roman Catholicism - communion is celebrated weekly, or in every worship service. For Mennonites, it may be as infrequent as once a year. Our predecessors in the faith, John Calvin and John Wesley saw weekly communion as essential⁸.

Shall we sit in the pews, or come forward for communion? Part of the question is: Are we called to participate in communion by coming forward, or are we to be recipients by being served in the pews?

Coming forward for communion has been the custom of Methodists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Orthodox and Roman Catholics. Coming forward to receive communion is a symbolic act - indicating our commitment to the Way of Christ. It also re-enacts a gathering of the community at the table.

I understand that at my home congregation in Napanee they still follow the old Methodist practice of having small groups come forward to receive at the communion rail on Christmas Eve. At other times, but not always, their United Church congregation is served in the pews by the Elders. There the community eats and drinks at the same time as a community.

⁷ Guide to Sunday Worship, page 73

⁸ Guide to Sunday Worship, page 11

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All of the communion practices in our Christian churches have a meaning attached. What does communion mean to you and how does the method of sharing communion speak most deeply to you? That is a community decision!

The early church used a common cup - which we do in the practice known as intinction when bread is dipped into a cup of wine - or grape juice. This practice is approximately 1500 years old in the church.⁹ In some congregations the bread is cut into pieces beforehand; others have a practice whereby people tear a piece of bread from the loaf.

⁹ Guide to Sunday Worship – page 94

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The practice of using separate small glasses for serving wine emerged in Protestant churches at the end of the 19th century - not so long ago! There is a picture of this on the front of your bulletin today. The argument was that drinking from the individual glasses was more hygienic than dipping bread into a common cup.

My first memories of communion are that small pieces of white bread - no crusts - and small glasses of grape juice were served BY THE CHURCH ELDERS to adults sitting in the pews. Everyone waited to eat and drink as a community. This was how communion was shared on June 10, 1925 at the first communion service of the United Church of Canada.

All this is to say that, over time, and for many reasons, our practices have changed. In the United Church of Canada, the local congregation decides HOW communion is to be shared, and WHEN it is to be shared. In all of our diversity, we still share communion as a COMMON sacrament with other Christians world-wide!

That word COMMON is a radical word. All of the communion - type stories in our gospels show that when Jesus ate with others, as he did with 5,000 in one story, there was a SHARING so that all were fed. This is contrary to the doctrine of greed and selfishness that has caused the current economic crisis, and continues to drive the economic system of the world. Sharing communion means that we share a profound belief . **We believe that we are all loved as God's children, and all ought to share equally at the table of life.**

If we re-read Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, it is easy to see that he was chastising the church for its lack of equity in its communion practices - something like the economic system of the world today. Paul wrote about communion where some ate too much, and some left without eating - what does that remind you of?

I read that Paul was saying that the church ought to model a different way through its sharing of communion.

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There is a powerful mystery about communion. When we share communion the community becomes transformed. At the table we offer ordinary gifts of bread and grape juice. By some miracle they are transformed into a means of grace for us, and for all of God's world.. They become for us the body of Christ - and those become a part of our bodies.

"The bread and wine are signs to us, that we may become a sign to the world, of a love far greater than the world has ever known, a love that offers this world a hope and a future."¹⁰

Hymn # 460 - All Who Hunger



¹⁰ David Newman, Worship as Praise and Empowerment, page150.