

United Summit Methodist Church

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Today is World Communion Sunday. It is a time when Christians all over the world celebrate the Eucharist – rich, poor, black, white, mentally advantaged and disadvantaged, gay and straight. Celebrating communion is a time when we all come together and the focus is not on our differences but on our oneness. These differences and inequalities still exist. There is always going to be a person to whom it seems as if trouble is a foreign concept. There is always going to be somebody who never seems to get a break. Communion does not change this. Christ's sacrifice does not change these earthly circumstances. But despite these seemingly insurmountable differences, we are one. As James White, a scholar of Protestant worship puts it, "The Eucharist meets us all as equals before God." We are equal in our sin and we are equal in our forgiveness.

It used to be that I viewed Communion as a time for atonement of my personal sins. As if what I do could actually affect God. I would take the

bread and cup and kneel at the chancel rail where I would proceed to ask God for forgiveness for small personal sins, and never really grasped the concept of communal or corporate sin. I think that communal sin is more dangerous, because it is something that we engage in as a community – just as it is much more encompassing when good is done by a larger number, so it is with evil or sin. When we as a community condone some sort of sin either by commission or omission – that is to say by something that we intentionally do or something that we intentionally do not do, we are committing that communal sin. If we ignore the cries of the needy, overlook the oppression of a group of people, pretend that we don't see people who are spiritually and physically starving, then we are committing the gravest type of sin. When we are baptized and when we take communion, we are part of the Body of Christ. According to the World Council of Churches, "Communion with God in Christ and community with God's people are two aspects of one sacrament. Yet often the worshipper who participates in the eucharist does so as a lonely individual although surrounded by other people...It leads to weakness in our witness, for we may have no sense of corporate action in the world, but only of private action."

The reason we are to avoid sin is not to secure a heavenly reward, but rather the type of sin I am referring to is to avoid hurting other people. Because we are all part of Christ's body, when we do something harmful or ignore a need, it is as if we are doing that to all members of the Body. As a church, if we deny the sacrament of communion to someone either by making them feel unwelcome or by verbalizing some unworthiness that you perceive, you are essentially doing that to Christ. As the Scripture today says, what you have done to the least of these you have done unto me. If we turn people away, if we ignore their pain and hurt, if we put ourselves above all else, we have done it to Christ. But you know, I think Jesus can handle it; we should be more concerned about the way we are treating other people. The second half of that Scripture refers to what we don't do to or for the least of these. If we look at that literally, we might think it refers to the afterlife, but I think it is about the present. While God is always present, how can we see or experience God when we commit these communal sins.

Sometimes our perception of communion is that it is for the righteous, or for those who are worthy, those who have repented of their sin, those who

are blameless. Jesus ate with sinners and tax collectors; none of us are righteous – we are all sinners and tax collectors. If it were the case that to come to the table with Jesus, we must be blameless, Jesus would be eating alone. Not one of us is more worthy than another. When we recognize that we are equal in sin and equally forgiven, maybe then we can truly understand what it means to take communion. When we recognize that God loves us as sinners, and not on the condition that we are striving for perfection as John Wesley would put it, then we might be able to better love one another. God has no conditions on God's love. Neither should we.

We all recited the United Methodist Social Creed at the beginning of the service today. This creed was written 99 years ago, yet it is still pertinent today. In fact, it seems as if we have done very little regarding what we profess to believe. As a Church, the Body of Christ, as we take Communion together, I would ask you to think about some of these professions of belief, not just as this community, but as the entire Church, which today celebrates World Communion Sunday. We dedicate ourselves to the preservation of God's handiwork, which is the natural world. How are we doing on this? We commit ourselves to the rights of men, women, children,

youth, young adults, the aging, and people with disabilities; to improvement of the quality of life; and to the rights and dignity of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. How are we doing on this? We dedicate ourselves to peace throughout the world, to the rule of justice and law among nations, and to individual freedom for all people of the world. How are we doing on this? I don't mean to say that we are not striving towards these things, but many times we are doing it individually. Just think how much more power we would have as a united front – going forth in justice as the Body of Christ. It is through the mysterious power of communion that we all share equally in the body of Christ, that we all become functioning parts of that same body.

I like the Scripture lesson from Luke. Jesus tells a parable of the rich man who held a great banquet. None of his friends could come because they were all too busy. Instead, people who could have never expected to be invited to such an amazing dinner are pulled in off the streets. These dinners were a time for people of social standing to honor others of the same social standing with an invitation to some lavish dinner. And I regret to inform the students staying after worship that our lunch won't be quite

so adorned. So, anyway, being invited to one of these dinners was a mark that you were one of the elite. So when this man held his dinner and his friends decided at the last minute that they had something better to do, he had a potentially embarrassing situation on his hands. Now his choice could have actually caused more embarrassment in that society. However, this dinner represents the kingdom of God. This can be interpreted in different ways, but Luke's is a gospel of social justice and social action. He is talking about doing God's work – about bringing about the kingdom. Those who turned down the invitation at the last minute did so for personal reasons – property, family ties. They put their own personal business ahead of the kingdom of God. This parable is also a lesson of inclusion. Those who are shunned by society are the ones at the banquet table. This does not mean that those who are rich or have family commitments are not doing kingdom work. In fact the parable is not really about those people at all. It is about the ones who are included. Nobody was excluded from this banquet table, just as no one is excluded from the banquet that we share in Holy Communion.

James White says, "We come to church to meet our God and the first thing that happens is that we meet our neighbor. On the way to communion is the only time we pass all segments of our society. There is a fine equality at the Lord's Table as we all go to receive Christ. It is a gift, no matter who we are." People may look different from you, choose different lifestyles than you, come from different backgrounds, have more or less money, have more or less things, food, clothes, but we are all the same. There is nothing that separates us in God's eyes; when we come to take communion, we are all sinners and we are all forgiven. We all come with different gifts, but we are all essential to the functioning of the body. Whether we have been baptized or not; whether we believe or not; whether we are living like some other human thinks we should be living or not, we are all equal in God's eyes. It has been my experience at Summit that we embrace diversity, that we value all parts of the body of Christ. Let us meet each other as equals as we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion.