WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

*For the Sake of the World*

Romans 12:1, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

October 3, 2021

La Verne Church of the Brethren

Susan Boyer

During our Covid separation from each other, one of the things that Christians found most difficult to navigate doing, while staying apart, was the act of communion. For centuries, communion is something we do in each other’s physical presence. Instead, we gathered around computer screens with the beverages from our refrigerators and the bread or cracker from our pantry. It still allowed us to do the important part…to remember. But there is something missing when we aren’t together in the same space. We missed the physical communion of communion.

Today is World Communion Sunday. Christians around the world are gathered in person and virtually to do the important part….to remember Jesus’ love and sacrifice. We don’t need to eat bread and drink juice to remember Jesus. But we do it because Jesus instructed his disciples to give thanks and remember him every time we sit down at the table to share a meal….every time we eat. In our tradition, the act of taking communion is a ritual to remind us to give thanks as we remember the death of Jesus.

Christina Baldwin says:

Ritual consists of the external practices of spirituality that help us become more receptive and aware of the closeness of our lives to the sacred. Ritual is the act of sanctifying action – even ordinary action – so that it has meaning. I can light a candle because I need the light or because the candle represents the light I need.

We take communion not because the tiny little piece of bread and the little swallow of grape juice will sustain us but because of the sustenance to which it points. Communion points to…even creates….what is called a liminal space…a space in which we are aware of the closeness of our lives to the sacred….a space in which bread and juice and the act of sharing it with each other is filled with God’s promise to meet us, feed us, unite us and call us into lives of service and love…a space filled with the possibility of transformation.

In the scripture that Roger read this morning the Apostle Paul, in describing this ritual of communion, invites us into a very specific night – the last night of Jesus’ life when he gathered with his disciples for Passover and infused meaning into the ordinary act of eating. Like Luke and John, Paul wants us to know that Jesus created this ritual on the night that he was betrayed. Paul does not want us to forget the context that birthed this ritual. On the very night that Jesus was betrayed, he shared a meal with his betrayer and gave us the ritual of communion. He sanctified action so that it had meaning. He created a liminal space in our ordinary everyday act of eating…and he did it on the night he was betrayed.

Betrayal is a harsh word. It is a personal word. Deception can happen by anyone, but betrayal is an intimate act. You can’t betray someone you don’t know. The context of betrayal is important to Paul because he is writing to the Christians in Corinth about the manner in which they re-enact the last supper Jesus shared with his disciples. Paul knows that they have taken this sacred ritual and removed some of the sacredness right out of it. They have removed community from communion. Some arrive early because they live lives of leisure. They don’t use this time to prepare to serve the others who work all day. No, they eat up the food and drink the wine. Those who can’t get off work early find their fellow church members drunk and the food gone when they arrive.

Betrayal is the context of the meal at the Last Supper and in Corinth….and yet, it is not the central piece…the definitive moment. The heart of that night was Jesus at the table with his friends, asking them to remember him every time they eat.

My youngest son visited me last weekend. He is the pastry chef I mentioned earlier. Eating with him is such a treat and it is always a teaching moment. He will say things to me like, “Can you name all the flavors in this dish?” or “Do you know how to make mayo from scratch?” or “How far do you think these tomatoes traveled from where they are grown to your kitchen?” We talk about the wonders of yeast and how I should tend my fruit trees and why an heirloom tomato stone fruit salad reminds us that tomatoes are really fruit.

There is sacredness in eating with someone who understands the importance of the table and the food on it. My son experiences the table as a place of joy, celebration, connection, wonder and justice. The table matters. It is the place of nourishment – physically, spiritually, psychologically and sociologically. We share of ourselves in the most basic way. On the night that he was betrayed, Jesus picks up a loaf of bread and his eyes travel around the table at the people who know him best and can wound him most deeply and he says, “This is my body given for all of you. Remember me.”

Remembering can be a painful thing. We want time to smooth over the rough edges of our painful memories. But Jesus doesn’t want them to smooth over what is about to happen to him. Jesus handed them this ritual of communion before Judas went out into the night to seal his deal of betrayal. He created this liminal space before his own disciples saw him arrested….before they witnessed his whipped and bleeding body. He created this sacred act for all of us knowing what was to come. Jesus encourages his disciples to use the ordinary – the bread and wine – to remind them and us of the harsh realities of the consequences Jesus bore in his body because of his anti-imperial work. He gave them communion in anticipation of what is about to happen. “Remember me when I am no longer here among you. This bread will help you call to mind what sacrifice and true love look like.”

We have an incarnational theology….a theology that tells us that God became flesh and dwelt among us. God came to us to fully understand what it means to be human. God wanting to understand….to be in full communion with us…. was born, lived, suffered and died, just as we will all do. The bread and the cup point to that liminal space…that threshold where we experience communion with the God who loves us enough to come to us…to put on flesh and experience what we experience. Jesus says, “Remember me. Remember how much I love this world and all of you. I lay down my life for my friends. There is not greater love than that. I give my life for the sake of the world. Don’t forget.”

When you eat bread today, remember the love of God that comes to you in the very midst of your life…even in the midst of betrayal. Just soak that in as you taste the bread in your mouth. Close your eyes and feel how deeply God loves you.

At the end of the meal, Jesus lifts a cup as again his eyes travel around the table and he says, “This is my blood, my new covenant with you. Remember me.” In just a few hours, in the Garden of Gethsemane, before his impending arrest, Jesus will pray a painful prayer to God, “Please God, if you are willing, take this cup from me…..but not my will but yours be done.” Jesus pleads with God to remove the cup. But the cup is a choice. It is a decision to give your life for the sake of the world. To love even if it requires something of you…especially when it requires something of you. Jesus took the cup.

When you drink the cup today, remember what God asks of us….to give ourselves in love for the sake of the world….to become love…to cultivate peace…to stand for justice, to truly love our neighbors as we love ourselves…to share this table of God’s love with everyone, even your betrayers.

I know that this journey of faith and faithfulness to the Jesus way isn’t easy. Jesus knew that when he looked around the table on that night in which he was betrayed. So, he gave his disciples and us the bread and the cup to hang on to. “Remember me,” he said. “Remember what this whole thing was about in the first place. Don’t focus on your fear or the betrayal or what the empire thinks it can do to those who speak out against its injustice. Remember me. Remember what pure love looks like and follow me in the way of love and be love.”

All of that packed into a piece of bread and a sip of wine. As you eat and drink today, remember and recommit yourself. Then let your eyes travel around the courtyard to those with whom you are sharing this ritual. This is not something we do alone. We do this life….this love and this journey of faith together. And when you have finished looking around at the people with whom you share a church home, close your eyes and think about all of those who are taking communion around this whole wide world today. This is a large community of love….a gift from the God who loves you enough to come to you and then to trust you to carry that love in your body for the sake of the world. Amen.