

Sunday Communion¹

Pastor Cynthia Lapp
Worldwide Communion Sunday
October 4, 2009

Psalm 8
Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

It is wonderful to be here again, home, after three months. When I first left for sabbatical I couldn't fathom being gone for 12 consecutive Sundays. Returning home after a three-week vacation, it felt more like deprivation than privilege to have a break from this gathering. But over the weeks, I began to look forward to visiting other churches. I will say I have new empathy for people who visit our church not knowing a soul. You don't know if you will be received with a hug or a shrug. On my visits I was greeted with both, although hugs from people you have never met are a bit overwhelming, even for me.

One might think that I would come home full of theological insights I learned in sermons. But there are so many other ways to learn about theology besides words, and my memory being what it is, I remember the experience more than the words. (Not a good plug for why you should listen to rest of what I have to say this morning but you probably know what I am talking about.) So rather than give you my sermon notes from the past 12 Sundays, on this Worldwide Communion Sunday I will share a few of the ways I was fed by other churches.

One Sunday I went to the National Shrine. I hadn't been there for a service in more than 20 years. I know that the culmination of the mass is communion, and I knew I would not participate out of respect for the Roman Catholic teaching that one must be Catholic to share in the Eucharist. I admit that hurts my ecclesial feelings and leaves me feeling empty, but there is still much to learn from this gathering.

¹ This is an edited version of the sermon delivered on Oct. 4, 2009. Some names have been omitted for privacy. For a full version, please call the church office to request a sound recording of the service.

The Shrine was by far *the largest*, the *most international* and the *most diverse* church I worshipped with all summer. People from all over the world were there to receive Eucharist, to enact their commitment by sharing the bread and cup. Even if some of those in the gathered community don't agree with what the Vatican says, they come to mass and share the bread and cup. They do not allow disagreement to take this connection with the divine and the people of God away from them. And that persistent action feeds me.

Anna Roeschley spoke a few weeks ago about her experience of communion as a young person. If you weren't right with God, and everyone else, it was a dangerous, damning thing. I vividly remember a communion Sunday at Allegheny Conference some years ago when I was not at all in agreement with the preceding sermon or most of the gathered body. Brokenness was quite apparent that morning as the bread was shared.

I took communion that day, not without some discomfort, but I couldn't let the disagreement with the preacher and the conference take away my spiritual food. Can we learn to eat together, at the communion table and the kitchen table, despite our disagreements? What is the balance between a pure fellowship with God and others on the one hand and our human, sinful self that wants to invite other sinners to the table?

I visited a very small church where the gathered community was 20-25 people firmly rooted in middle age with a sprinkling of younger folks. This congregation started in the 1960s with commitments to justice and discipleship and these remain hallmarks. Part of their ongoing practice of discipleship is the weekly celebration of Eucharist.

This congregation is a lay led community. The "priesthood of all believers" is part of their way of being church. As a visual symbol of this, a clerical stole is passed from one person to another as they take turns leading worship, reading scripture, preaching or leading communion. As Paul reminds us in I Corinthians, *all parts of the body are needed* and each had a part to play that day in worship. As we shared communion, I was fed by the intimacy and intentionality of that small community with its deliberate presence and ministry in Mount Pleasant.

The Metropolitan Community Church (or the MCC Church, which is quite confusing for Mennonites) is a congregation (and worldwide denomination) committed to serving the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. In my worship there, I found it to be a place of healing for people of diverse backgrounds who have struggled to find a church where they can feel welcome.

At the MCC church I experienced an unusual blend of high church and informality. Several times the pastor said, "The Lord be with you" and the congregation responded "And also with you." The words of institution for communion were similar to those you might hear in a mainline church. But then things diverged.

Each Sunday people are invited to come forward to receive healing prayer. People streamed forward while the choir and congregation sang, "Hush, Hush, Somebody's calling my name." Lost in the music, I suddenly realized the singing had almost stopped and people were holding out their hands as if in blessing. Then there was clapping and "hallelujahs" and I realized that someone had just been baptized. The singing resumed, but twice more we raised our hands in blessing and our voices in thanks. Each Sunday during the healing prayer and alter call, baptism is offered. Several Sundays later you become a member of the church.

What a contrast to the Mennonite church where one receives months of teaching before baptism and membership. I have always thought this appropriate and important in making this significant decision to follow the way of Jesus. But in the context of MCC, where people have previously been mistreated by the church and told that God doesn't love them, why not receive those who desire union with Jesus with open arms, immediately? I do wonder what this means about the role of discipleship in this tradition? And the role of faith?

Another practice at the MCC church that caught my attention is the reception of communion. People come forward as individuals, couples or families. Theologically this may feel dissonant to us, to have a family receive communion together. Don't we stand alone before God? But at the MCC church, communion is more like a joyful family meal. And each family is blessed with a

special prayer if they so choose. These families and couples who are often scorned by the church, their extended families or society, are blessed each week at church. What would it look like for us as a congregation to bless those relationships that are usually ignored, devalued or disrespected? How can we affirm what we know to be right and holy even if we are told otherwise by the larger church and society?

I visited two congregations where I was one of a handful of Anglos. I was warmly welcomed at both churches. While communion was not celebrated at either church on the day I visited, I was fed. Top-notch bands, choirs, challenging sermons (although not the kind of challenge to which I have grown accustomed) and the practice of holding hands with the people next to me during the Lord's Prayer all nurtured me. I was left with much to chew on.

The 11 o'clock service at Crossover Church is taped and televised on cable later in the week. The gathered body was clearly engaged, but as I reflect back I wonder how "being on TV" affects what the pastor preaches about, how they choose their music, and if timing is everything. After the service, I was invited to a special reception for visitors. I met the pastoral staff, was given a mug and a pen, and offered a lovely spread of cookies, fruit and drinks.

While there is a high respect for visitors in this congregation, there is also a high view of the pastor. It is quite a contrast to the small congregation where leadership is shared. I missed the event but I read on the church website about Pastor Appreciation Day at the Crossover Church. Among other things, to celebrate his 20th year in leadership, the pastor was presented with a brand new motorcycle.

First Baptist was a gathering of about 400 where the pastor called people by name from the pulpit. Pastoring this congregation for over 40 years, Rev. Smith has grown to know not only the grandparents but parents and grandchildren as well. Rev. Smith noticed a young man in full dress military uniform in the congregation and invited him to come forward to be acknowledged. At the end of the service he invited the young soldier to stand in line with the pastors to greet people as they left. However, the pastor's last word

to the congregation, before the benediction, was how thankful he was that he had become a pastor and not gone into the military himself 40 years earlier. What an interesting balance of recognizing this young man's choice and holding out another way, a way that clearly this respected leader would rather see.

Surveys tell us that many Mennonites no longer have a strong commitment to peace. How do we respect that choice? Should we continue to posit another way? How do we stay in fellowship with each other? And what about our neighbors who feel like the military is their only choice for education and getting ahead economically. Should we judge them? Can we extend a hand of friendship and peace?

I did visit a Mennonite church. Faith Mennonite is a congregation much like this one: urban, professional, overwhelmingly white, welcoming, (Faith was disciplined some 10 years ago, but has since been returned to full membership in their conference), and they have a woman as pastor.

We happened to visit the day of the pastor's ordination. Representatives from Mennonite congregations around the area were there to sing, read scripture and bring greetings. The pastor's mentor, another woman preacher, was well into her sermon when a voice from the congregation shouted, "Women preaching is an abomination in the eyes of God!"

People looked around, wondering if this was some kind of sermon illustration gone bad. And then, as if in unison, about eight men from the congregation calmly stood and walked to the man standing in the aisle. They surrounded him and peacefully walked him out of the service. The preacher repeated what she had been saying when she had been interrupted, "We are called to embody the reconciling love of Jesus."

There was no shouting back, there was no violence, there was not even any arguing, just a group of men walking together. After some time the group returned, along with the unknown man. He was escorted to a seat in the center of the congregation. Several men stayed close to him, reassuring him that this was a house of God, that the Spirit was at work and no doubt also praying that he would be silent for the rest of the service.

This was the gospel come to life. We didn't break bread in the service that day but we were each other's bread and wine. Out of the brokenness, fear and anger, we glimpsed the possibilities for wholeness in the body of Christ.

It was a gift to be fed by other parts of the body of Christ these past months, to sample the rich worship that is offered to God each week. And yet, we love what we know. It is good to return home to the table where I am known by name and the food is familiar.

Today we share the bread and cup, with each other, and symbolically with people in churches all over the world. As we heard from Hebrews — *The one who makes holy — and those who are made holy — are all from the One God. And because of this Jesus is not afraid to call us sisters and brothers.*

As a family, as sisters and brothers through Christ, we share the table with those whom we agree and perhaps with those whom we have strong disagreement. And yet we believe, maybe even experience, that somehow in this eating and drinking, there is healing. In this meal, at this table, we are living out what Jesus taught: from the grain that is ground and the grapes that are crushed, new possibilities emerge. Out of death can come life. Alleluia, may it be so.