Isaiah 25:6-9, John 6:48-59

“What is communion?”

Welcome to World Communion Sunday. I have been so blessed to be able to fully appreciate World Communion Sunday because of the many different countries where I have been able to celebrate and/or participate in communion. One of my most memorable communions was on my last Easter Sunday in Moscow. In the morning the Anglican Church asked me every year to co-celebrate communion with their priest and then we had our service in the afternoon for Easter, as we did every Sunday. It was a great Sunday, but Stacy and the girls would have to get to church by taking the subway because I had the car in order to take the communion things for the MPC service.

I packed all of the communion supplies in the plastic crate that had probably been used since its inception in 1962. There was a bottle of wine, a bottle of grape juice, 150 little glass cups, two glass pitchers. You get the point. I walked out of our apartment and as soon as I crossed the threshold and started down the stairs by the elevator, the bottom of the crate gave out and all of the contents in the crate went crashing down the stone steps and the landing below. The wine bottle exploded and sprayed the entire hallway with wine, the little glasses shattered as well as the pitchers. I could only stand there in shock holding the empty, bottomless crate while my family came rushing out of the door certain that I had fallen down the steps. It all took about 3 minutes before the last glass cups landed on the bottom and broke.

We still had communion that afternoon, we just had to improvise, and I use that Sunday as an example that no matter how badly things begin, God can still be glorified. The saddest communion experience I had was when I was attending a conference in Graz, Austria, and the panel discussion was on communion with the focus on Protestants and Catholics and I’ll never forget a couple on the panel who said that for their 25 years of marriage they had never been able to take communion together, because they were a mixed couple, one Catholic, one Protestant. There is no greater sin that we share as Christians than the fact that we cannot sit at the table together. What a terrible witness to the world. And we are all to blame.

So what does communion mean to us? We celebrate it every month, and we celebrate it differently this month than we did last month. But don’t most of us take it for granted and do we ever ask ourselves what communion means to me and my family or is it just another church thing that we do like baptism, and sign the friendship pad, and all those other things that are really important for us on Sundays.

I changed the second Scripture today because these latter verses are called the words of institution for John. This is where John has Jesus establish communion for his disciples to take part in for the rest of history. The other Gospels have the establishment of this institution at the Last Supper, and it is described in detail there. Here, instead, John defines what communion is.

We are going to look at communion today and what it means to us using three main thoughts: Communion is a celebration, communion gives life, and communion is about community.

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Chronologically the first time that we find communion in Scripture is in I Corinthians 11:20 where Paul calls it the “supper of the Lord”. It was understood to have been a real meal for the whole community. You see why I love eating together as a church body, God commands us to, and I’m sure that I can find a reference to ham loaf somewhere in Acts of the Apostles.

But this historical Christian act was seen with much skepticism by the society of that day. The Roman Octavius called it infant cannibalism and said the following about Christians gathered around the table: “Thirstily- O horror!, they lick up its blood.” Even the Scripture we have today has Jesus speaking of how his disciples have to eat his flesh and drink his blood. In vs. 60 we hear his disciples say that this is a difficult teaching, but that’s for another week.

So what does communion mean for us today? I love the Isaiah Scripture as it applies to communion for us. Go back there if you would. We hear about a feast that God hosts and this feast has the effect of lifting a shroud that is cast all over the people. Isaiah describes this feast as a celebration that takes us from the dulldrums of the week to leaving this church in a completely different state of mind and emotionally in a very different and good place. A celebration can do that to you.

But that doesn’t seem to be the norm at most communion tables these days in churches around the country. We do see communion more as a funeral dirge and a sacrament that is so solemn that we only see the sacrifice and we miss the celebration. I’m going to venture a guess that this church gest the whole celebration thing. Last Sunday our future youth director was in church just to check us out. She said that every single person that she saw this past Sunday stopped her, greeted her, and welcomed her. Well done family, well done. I got a call this past week from the son of Marjorie Betts and he just wanted to tell me how much he appreciates the constant presence of the church in his mom’s life. You want to hear another sign of a celebrating church again this past?

Every Friday I lead chapel for our preschool, they’re learning the 10 commandments, and on the way back from the sanctuary I poked my head in the coffee shop and there was a mom homeschooling her 2nd grader. She’s the mom of one of our preschoolers and her face lit up and she said: I love this room, it is so warm, and quiet, no distractions or dogs barking, so much better than home. Our church so much better than home. Who would have thought? A celebration church, that’s what we are.

The second aspect of communion after it being a celebration we find in John 6. The key verse in our Scripture this morning is found in vs. 53. Underline it and put the date next to it. Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life. That’s funny, I take communion and I still don’t have a life, get a life, take communion. Make Jesus yours, get a life.

Jesus explains what he means in this verse later in vs. 56 when he states that they who take communion abide in Christ. This is what having life in Christ is, it is abiding in him, dwelling in him. The flesh of Christ gives life because it is in Jesus’ very death, his sacrifice, that we have life.

I need to wrap it up, so let’s look at the last one, communion is about community. There are three different interpretations to what happens during communion. All denominations believe that Jesus is present. This is crucial. We believe, as the Catholics do, that Jesus is present at communion. Does that surprise you? The difference is how he is present. The Roman Church and the Orthodox church believe that he is physically present and that the bread and wine change substance and actually become body and blood. The fancy term is transubstantiation.

We believe in the real presence of Jesus, but it is a spiritual presence where he is truly present among this body of believers during communion in a way that Jesus is not present when the elements of wine and bread, and without this sacrament. Finally, there is a memorialism where our Mennonite and other Anabaptist brothers and sisters believe where Jesus isn’t actually present any more during communion, but rather it is more of a time to memorialize what he did around the table.

Since we believe as Presbyterians that Jesus is present within the community then I would never take communion by myself because there is no community present. It doesn’t make sense for me while for the Catholic priest it is imperative. But our faith is too communal for that. And since Jesus is present, folks, it better be a celebration. Every communion should be a party. Every first Sunday of the month we should all be meeting to eat somewhere, here maybe, to celebrate his presence in our midst.

So what is communion? It is a celebration, it is life giving, it is an opportunity to be in community. May God bless us and keep us as we do just that. Amen.