

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
World Communion Sunday
Sunday, October 2, 2022
10am

Text: Acts 2:42-47 (NRSVUE)

[Prayer]

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. This tradition is almost ninety years old, dating to 1933 when a Presbyterian minister named Hugh Thomson Kerr dreamed of bringing different churches together for a service of Christian unity.¹ Reverend Kerr chose the eucharist – the celebration of Holy Communion – as the practice that most demonstrates our interconnectedness as followers of Jesus. At the Lord's table, our differences in tradition, theology, and practice are stripped away. Each of us is offered a seat here; each of us is fed the same body and blood of Jesus; each of us receives hospitality and grace from God.

For as long as Christianity has existed, Christians have disagreed over what makes a 'true' church. Schism is in our DNA. The Catholics split from the Orthodox, and then the Protestants from the Catholics, and in short order we Protestants splintered and continue to splinter into thousands of denominational and non-denominational churches. At each division, the underlying question is this: What makes a church *true*? Is it what we believe? What we do? How we gather? Who we include (or exclude)?

Preaching on Christian unity can feel like an especially joyless task in this era of deep division. This year we come to World Communion Sunday facing the splintering of our own denomination and the birth of a new one, The Global Methodist Church. The schism is primarily over a single issue: Whether and how to include LGBTQ+ Christians in the life of the church. I preached last week that if we believe we are one in Jesus, then to reject a member of the body is to also reject a piece of ourselves; it is literally dismembering our body. The UMC has been rejecting our LGBTQ+ siblings for decades to their deep harm and suffering, cutting them off from the body.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Communion_Sunday

Some United Methodists argue that the departure of traditionalist congregations for the Global Methodist Church is a necessary amputation that will free the UMC to be more inclusive. They say this particular dismembering will make us a healthier church. Perhaps. I pray that our LGBTQ+ siblings will receive the full blessing of our church. But I still grieve the dismembering. As one of our retired bishops, Bishop Will Willimon, recently wrote: “As your pastor, I’m prejudiced toward togetherness.”² Dividing the church may be the only way to overcome our intractable disagreements, but schism is always counter to the Way of Jesus. Justice is part of the witness of the church, but so is togetherness.

Togetherness is the whole theme of our Scripture lesson. Christians often look to Acts 2 for guidance in defining ‘church.’ This description of the church in Jerusalem immediately follows Pentecost – the birth of the church. Prior to Pentecost, Jesus’ followers numbered just one-hundred-twenty people – roughly the size of your average American congregation. But after the Holy Spirit descends and lights a fire in their hearts, after they hear Peter preach the risen Jesus, their numbers increase thirty-fold. In a single day, three-thousand people are converted and baptized.

Contemplating the vision of three-thousand new believers packing our church sanctuary fills me with a mixture of wonder and jealousy. A single baptism is cause for rejoicing. What overwhelming joy the early church must have felt when those three-thousand people came to Christ!

And what drew those three-thousand converts? The powerful sermons, and the “wonders and signs” being performed by the apostles, were indeed part of what attracted people. But what made people stay and commit, what made people not just casual participants but *devoted disciples*, was the rich and vibrant faith practiced by the early Christians. It was the way the church gathered that was most attractive. It was the sense of community they shared. Acts does not record those three-thousand conversions as a benchmark for successful ministry; they are recorded as an example of the magnetic power of a community gathered around the risen Jesus.

Acts uses the Greek word *koinonia* to describe the unique fellowship of the early church. *Koinonia* means communion with God and with each other. It is more

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/united-methodist-divorce-mistake>

than just friendship between believers. *Koinonia* implies intimacy, fidelity, and commitment – the kind of commitment you find in a healthy marriage. The early Christians were devoted to each other in the same way that spouses are devoted to each other. There was no more important relationship in their lives than their relationship with God and one another.

[pause]

The devotion of the early Christians was expressed through four core disciplines: Scripture, prayer, generosity, and table fellowship.

The early church read and studied Scripture *together*. They encountered the Risen Christ in the letters of Paul and the other apostles, as well as in the Hebrew scriptures. And the words they heard guided and informed their daily lives, just as they guide us today.

The early church prayed *together*. They prayed some of the same prayers we pray, such as the Lord's Prayer and the Psalms. They were disciplined about regularly communing with God. They understood that to encounter the risen Jesus, they would need to prioritize making sacred space in their lives to listen *together* for God's voice.

The early church practiced generosity *together*. Their generosity was more than simply distributing alms to the poor. Acts tells us that the early Christians shared all things in common and gave to anyone in need. This practice is especially challenging for Christians like us who live in an affluent society that values personal property and wealth. The early church's economic practices have been described as socialist. But they were not. Instead, they were grassroots and community-focused. Their sacrificial sharing was the natural result of *koinonia* – a community of people so devoted to each other that they would sell their belongings to make sure that no one's need went unmet.

Finally, the early church made a habit of eating *together*. They practiced hospitality by sharing meals in each other's homes, including the Lord's Supper. In small gatherings around each other's tables, they came to know and love each other as siblings in Christ. Sharing food together is an ordinary but sacred way of encountering Jesus in another person. Luke writes, "When Jesus was at the table

with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him” (24:30-31). Every time we give thanks over a meal – whether at a church potluck, around our kitchen tables, or when we celebrate that most sacred meal of all, Holy Communion – we invite the risen Jesus to be with us. Jesus makes himself known to us in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup *with each other*.

[pause]

This past week I was at a clergy gathering in Wenatchee. Because of the pandemic, it was our first in-person gathering in three years. It felt so good to share that time together after being apart for so long. At our closing worship, we celebrated communion. I don’t often get to sit and watch people receive communion; usually I am serving. But this time, after I had received the sacrament, I sat down in my pew and watched my clergy siblings be served. In each of their faces I saw a glimpse of the kingdom of God. I saw the beauty of God’s heavenly banquet, where Christians across time and space will gather together, where the wounds of our division will at least be healed, and we will share in the most basic of human activities: eating a meal together.

I like how one of the commentaries on today’s Scripture describes the early church: “A place where the deepest human longings for God, community, and basic provision were being met in abundance for all.”³ The early Christians saw the church not as a building, not as an institution, but as a community where different people come together to share their gifts with each other. Every person is a gift with gifts to share. This is the basis of *koinonia*.

To use our gifts and allow others to use their gifts most effectively, we must live our lives in community. We must faithfully gather in community and fellowship with other believers. ‘Common’ and ‘unity’ are the pillars of community. Just as God has been benevolent with us, we are called to be benevolent with the gifts we have been given. We must share the gift of our lives in community. And when we generously share our lives with each other, those outside of our faith community take notice and God uses this to draw people to Him.

³ Timothy B. Hare, “Fourth Sunday of Easter,” *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide*, ed. by David L. Bartlett. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

For two thousand years, the disciplines of Scripture, prayer, generosity, and table fellowship have grounded the Church. They have consistently been the means of grace by which we encounter the living God in our midst. They nourish our spirits and transform our everyday living into something holy, so that our lives become a witness to others that Jesus is alive and well and still at work in our world. And when we combine the witness of our individual lives in common-unity, God is made known to the world.

[pause]

It is true that the Church has not always been a place of *koinonia*. Because the Church is every believer, every member of the body, we are all accountable for that failure. We must continue to name and confess the ways that we fall short in being beloved community – the ways that we have used Scripture and prayer to shame and manipulate others; the ways we have excluded people and denied them access to the Lord’s table; the ways we have hoarded wealth and power, rather than sharing with and empowering the least among us.

But so long as God walks with us, that vision of beloved community is still within our grasp. We have made a bold and public witness here in Coeur d’Alene: “All Means All – All Are Welcome.” We still have a lot of work to do to be a church where all are truly welcome. But our witness is where God asks us to begin. We focus on not just what is, but what can and will be: The body of Christ, whole and healed, where every person has an honored seat at God’s table. That statement is God’s promise to us and our promise to our community as together we build God’s kingdom.

As you come to the Lord’s table today, may you be reminded that you are a gift. You are gift with gifts. You are a gift with gifts to share in community. And after you have received the body and blood of Jesus, and taken your seat once more, look at the faces of your fellow Christians. Behold the witness of their lives. Behold the vision of that heavenly banquet breaking through, even here, even now.

Amen.