

Commune-ity
1 Corinthians 11:17-26

There is an aspect of our Communion ritual here at Plymouth that never fails to breathe awe into my spirit: watching a child receive the bread of life into his hand.

When a young one among us carefully takes that piece of bread into awkward fingers, he almost *always* pauses to look at it.

It is a mystery, this Communion.

And then the Deacon beside me serves the child the Cup of Christ's promise and blessing – to dunk his bread in juice like an oreo cookie in milk or receive a glass just the right size for small hands.

And he knows – in that moment I can read it in his face –

he knows: "I am a part of this community. These people love me. God loves me".

Even if he doesn't understand any of it intellectually, a child knows: I am a part of this.

Do you ever get that sense when you participate in the sacrament?

That understanding that God's love has spread out to envelope the whole earth – *and you with it* – in this simple act of sharing a meal?

Do you ever, when you receive the bread and cup, experience that awe, the mystery that you are made one with Christ;
one with the person beside you;
one with all?

Some of you may say, "yes, every time". But you are not alone if you say "no" or "not as often as I'd like". For many in our progressive UCC churches, we have lost touch with the childlike awe at what we share in Communion. Even though Jesus instructed it, we sometimes find it difficult to "enter the Kingdom of God as a little child".¹

Today is an opportunity to reconnect with those parts of this ritual that may have lost meaning or become stale for you. Because *Holy Communion is meant to be both a very personal experience, and an inherently communal one – never simply one or the other.*

Yet many of us find ourselves leaning more often to one end of the spectrum or the other in living out our faith.

Some members of our Christian family find it easy to experience their oneness with all of humanity, all of creation even... but less so to recognize that as relationship with the Divine, the Living Presence of God. And others of our Christian brothers and sisters are able to be in vivid, deep relationship with God through Jesus... but may lose track of the social obligations taught in Christ's message.

The sacrament of Holy Communion is a reminder for us to experience both – just as a child seems to do instinctually, amazed by her relationship with her church, and recognizing she's indeed beloved of God.

Both the social and the personal.

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In the early years of the 1<sup>st</sup> century church, Paul was trying to address a similar challenge. For the congregation at Corinth, the sharing of the holy meal had become a truly common act – ordinary to the point that the church had lost insight into Communion’s greater purpose beyond ritualized words. The act had lost its connection to Christ’s message, and with it, the people’s connection to the wonder and depth of their story:

“For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup,  
you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes”.

As often as you do this,  
you tell the story of Christ  
from beginning to end to new beginning:  
life, execution, resurrection...and new life *through you* in the world.

This is the purpose of Communion.

Today, with churches around the globe, we are participating in World Communion Sunday. We at Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ are proclaiming *our connection* to that story – to Christ, to one another here in this place, and to each Christian congregation out there – we are stating our oneness with the story.

So are other churches – ones very different from our own.  
And while we all share in the same story,  
none of us lives that story perfectly.

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You could probably hear Paul’s deep frustration with the local church as he wrote his letter. He’s upset that they, too, have lost their awe as they participate in the holy meal:

“when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper,
and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk”.

Who among our Christian family is drunk on the Spirit, and which of us are starved for it?

It seems many of us tend to fall into one of two understandings, dividing the sharing of bread and cup into either a moment for personal relationship with Christ, or an expression of social unity.

There are those Christians who connect with a deeply *individual* understanding of Communion, and a strongly *personal* interpretation of our part in the story. You may have heard this concept expressed by the idea of “personal salvation” – often verbalized in the formulaic proclamation: “Do you accept Jesus Christ as your *personal* Lord and Savior?” You can hear the emphasis on your relationship with God, your connection to the Creator and Redeemer.

And this is *one* part of what we are called to experience in the sacrament –
relationship with the One.

But there is imbalance in making this an extreme; one which some of us might see and shake our heads at in our own kindred churches. And yet they have a gift to share with us: knowledge of that same personal relationship with Christ.

And while those same members of the body of Christ may turn around and shake their heads at *our* part of the body for taking Christ’s message to the other extreme –

sometimes naming the UCC the United Church of Causes and thus taking Christ right out of it –
progressive faith communities also have a gift to share with them.

We have a distinctly *social* understanding of communion; a *social* concept of our part in Christ’s story. For example: today, as we acknowledge our oneness with all the diverse Christians around the world, we also support two socially-caring ventures.

The first is Bread for the World, through which we work with other people of faith to make an “offering of letters” to our representatives in Congress. With such a multitude of letters, we hope to have an impact on reducing hunger and poverty around the world.

CROP Walk is the second project that Plymouth champions today. CROP extends a local community’s reach into the world by neighbors walking side by side to stand against hunger internationally.

Plymouth recognizes, through our biblical story, Jesus’ own actions devoted to justice and love: and this is the story we faithfully follow.

Yet, being a congregation as imperfect as any other,
it sometimes seems we try to re-balance our brother and sister Christians’ *personal* emphasis
with our own strength in *social* salvation.

And it comes, perhaps, at the cost of that
childlike sense of awe I described earlier.

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In his poem “Choruses from the Rock”, T.S. Eliot states,

“There is not life that is not in community,  
and no community not lived in praise of God”.<sup>ii</sup>

Communal care and an individual relationship with the Divine must be one, never separate from each other, never distinct, but one feeding the other, filling each others’ hunger:

personal knowledge of God’s love for us can fill our  
holes of frustration when the work of justice seems  
long and more than we can ever overcome;

and loving action in and for the world fills our  
God-given desire for wholeness, oneness with all that is.

*Holy Communion* is the ritual act that reminds us of the connection between the two –  
relationship with God and relationship with one another.

This is the *full* story of Jesus Christ,  
from beginning to end to new beginning:  
and it proclaims our continuation of the story.

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UCC minister June Christine Goudey, in her book *The Feast of Our Lives*, reminds her fellow progressive Christians that worship “is not an afterthought of religious activism but a powerful instrument of personal and social transformation”.

“Where will we turn,” she asks, “for deep communion and community of the kind that
requires more from us than simply showing up whenever it suits us?”ⁱⁱⁱ

Where will we find the balance between the social and the personal connection to our faith?

Here. In worship. At this Table.

It is among the gathered community, where we “do this in remembrance” – all receiving together.

For as often as we eat this bread and drink the cup,
we proclaim Christ’s story;
our story as Christians in the world.

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The fact is that progressive Christians *do* have personal relationship with the Divine,  
and evangelical Christians *do* live social justice.

And Communion is the ritualized moment when these two distinct ways of enacting our  
faith are *always* one, and always balanced.

Worship is where we all ground our lives –  
 our work,  
 our play,  
 our family,  
 everything we are and  
 everything we do.

We ground ourselves *here*  
 in our *story* and in our *practices*  
 to deepen faith and hope and understanding of  
*why* we step out into the world the way we do.

So as we take part in Bread for the World's offering of letters,  
 and share in CROP Walk's communal care,  
 may we also be as a little child;  
 may we find our awe right here at this Table:  
 prepared and blessed for all the world –  
 and for *you personally*.

For you are a part of Christ's story.  
 As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,  
*you proclaim it.*  
 Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Mark 10:15.

<sup>ii</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from the Rock" (1934). For a full text online (and I do recommend reading the full poem), go to [http://insidework.net/static/downloads/products/choruses\\_from\\_the\\_rock.pdf](http://insidework.net/static/downloads/products/choruses_from_the_rock.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> June Christine Goudey, *The Feast of Our Lives: Re-imagining Communion* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002) 14-15.