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May 6th, 2018
Communion Sermon

1 Cor 10:17

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Luke 22:14-20

¹⁴When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. ¹⁵He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; ¹⁶for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

There are some things we do or see with such regularity in our lives that the wonder and awe of them tend to wear off. The beauty of a sunset, the power and responsibility of driving a car, the development of pregnancy and the birth of a child, the experience of flying in an airplane. Rarely do we stop to think about how complex and wonderful these things are... we start to take them for granted because we've grown so used to them. This happens within our faith life too, especially our repeated rituals. For some, the awe of Holy Communion has been dulled, either by familiarity or by frequency of practice. We go through the motions [each Sunday/month], responding with the rehearsed phrases of the liturgy, not really thinking about the words or the meaning of the elements. We partake of the familiar tastes of bread and juice and return to our seats, never really opening ourselves to the wonder and transformation available at this table. Today, we're going to slow down and draw our entire focus on this sacrament, to consider again what communion really means to us.

In the scripture we just read from Luke's gospel, we heard the account of Jesus sharing his last Passover meal with his disciples. "He took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in **remembrance** of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'" In **remembrance** of me – a phrase that has been converted to song lyrics, engraved on communion tables and chalices, and embroidered on vestments – is rich with meaning and command.

This remembering that happens during communion as we partake in the bread and wine can be translated to ANAMNESIS – a word first used by Plato which literally means a "loss of forgetfulness". We're more familiar with its opposite – amnesia – the loss of memory. We know how devastating memory loss can be, whether through amnesia, Alzheimer's, or the dementia that can go along with aging. People forget who they are and how they are connected with the people around them. Even that which they value and love most slips away. Remembering becomes a challenge and a blessing on the good days. So this anamnesis – this loss of forgetfulness – particularly that which we practice at the communion table - indicates an intentional remembering, a recalling of identity and a sense of who and whose we are. At the Last Supper, Jesus tells his disciples to remember him every time they break bread and drink wine. To loose their forgetfulness of who Jesus was for them, and the role they play in the Body of Christ.

Just as Jesus told the disciples to remember him nearly two thousand years ago, we too are called to remember him every time we participate in this sacrament. Just as the memories and emotions flood our consciousness when we recall a beloved memory or loved one, we are called to remember Christ; to remember the relationship we share with him, to remember that we are loved and accepted, forgiven and welcomed at the table, to remember all that Christ did for us, when he walked the earth all those years ago and all that he continues to do for us now. We are called to remember those times in our lives where Christ has walked beside us, through the good, the bad, and the ugly... remaining by our side through it all. We recall the love that Jesus came to share, the healing and forgiveness. We also remember the sacrifices he made – his commitment to his ministry even to the point of death. We remember that we too are called to live into the way that Jesus laid out for us - remembering that as we take in the Body of Christ, the Bread of Life, that we are to be the Body of Christ, in our world.

In my reading this week I came upon an amazing story of a Methodist pastor by the name of Thomas Pettepiece who was a political prisoner. Pettepiece writes of his first Easter Sunday spent in prison. He was among 10,000 prisoners. Most of the men had lost everything: their homes, their jobs, their furniture, their contact with their families. It was Easter Sunday, and they wanted to celebrate communion. But, they had no cup for communion. They had no wine for communion. They didn't even have water for communion. Nor did they have any bread for the Sacrament.

So, they practiced the communion of Empty Hands. "This meal in which we take part," Pettepiece said, "reminds us of the imprisonment, the torture, the death and final victory of

the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The bread is the body which he gave for humanity. The fact that we have none represents very well the lack of bread in the hunger of so many millions of human beings. The wine, which we don't have today, is his blood, and represents our dream of a united humanity, of a just society, without difference of race or class."

Then Pettepiece, the pastor, held out his empty hand to the next person on his right, and passed on the imaginary loaf. Each one took a piece and passed it on. Then he said, "Take, eat, this is my body, which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And together they ate the imaginary bread, trying to imagine tasting it.

After a moment they passed around the non-existent chalice, each imagining he was drinking from it. "Take, drink, this is the blood of Christ which was shed for you ... Let us give thanks, sure that Christ is here with us, strengthening us."

They gave thanks to God and then stood up and embraced each other. And a while later, one of the non-Christian prisoners came up to them and said, "You people have something special, which I would like to have." And the father of a girl who had died came up to Pettepiece and said, "Pastor, this was a real experience. I believe that today I discovered what faith is ..." (*from Visions of a World Hungry, quoted in A Guide To Prayer, Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, editors, The Upper Room, p. 143*).

Through this sacramental meal, we remember who Christ was and is for us – a Redeemer and Liberator, one who offers living water and reminds us of our belovedness. We celebrate the Holy Spirit's presence within and among us, empowering us to be and do far more than we could on our own. We connect with others within our community, remembering that we can't do this alone – and take comfort in knowing that we don't have to! As we celebrate communion this morning, I invite you to do so with awe and wonder, letting the words of the liturgy really sink in as you celebrate the amazing works that God continues to bring about in our midst. Thanks be to God for this gift of amazing grace poured out freely for us. Amen.