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This Holy Mystery: Unity

There's something powerful about sharing a meal together. Breaking bread and talking about life, feeds not only the physical, but also the relational... bodies and souls are nourished at the same time...

In recent years, sociologists and educators across the political spectrum have encouraged families to do one simple thing to maintain connection with one another: eat. The issue isn't just eating, of course. That's a non-negotiable. The issue instead is to eat together. The family dinner might seem cute and outdated in a mobile, crazy-busy current age, but there's something of importance here. When we grab a dinner on the run and eat in the car, or in front of the TV or the computer, we miss out on a million big and small ways of connecting with one another. Through conversation, eye contact, laughter, play, and even silence, relationships are nourished and strengthened, life is shared and oftentimes, conflict is managed in healthy non-explosive ways. A family dinner creates connection and fosters unity, in the midst of our disjointed, fast-paced lives.

Unity, it's a word we throw around a lot, but many of us have forgotten what it feels like to live united. We live in the United States. Many of us here are United Methodists... But it almost feels right now, in our nation and our denomination, that you couldn't hold together any more different people and opinions. Dissention and chaos reign while we hold fast to title "United." I fear it dilutes the meaning of the word for us... for what does it really look like and FEEL like to be united, to live in unity, to strive for wholeness, harmony, continuity and oneness? Rather than this unity, it feels like every day we become more and more divided over issues that pull us apart... People are at each other's throats, family members, friends, loved ones, congregations – arguing about who is right and who is wrong. True unity seems impossible in times like this... and we joke about being the United Methodist church, instead of a united one...

But it is important to remember that unity is not the same thing as uniformity. Unity is all different things working together for the same goal, while uniformity is CONFORMITY to the same conduct or opinions without any type of variation. Unity allows for difference – difference of opinions and beliefs, as long as there's a commonality that holds us together. It's like John Wesley's often quoted phrase, "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love

alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite." Unity does not equal uniformity!

In the Bible, the unity of the church is based not on everyone agreeing, singing from the same hymnal, reciting the same creed, worshiping in the same style, but on God's love for all. In our scripture readings we heard of this oneness, the unity that is formed and maintained around a table of fellowship. In the early church, the Lord's supper was observed as part of an actual meal that believers ate together. They ate to satisfy normal hunger, and like a family dinner, more than mere physical bodies were fed, but spirits and relationships were nurtured too. At some point in the meal, they shared some bread and wine, probably along with prayer, to make the symbolic connection to Jesus' last meal. Through the scripture we heard from in Acts, as well as Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we can surmise that the meal itself was something like a potluck dinner, with each family bringing food to share. The church in Corinth was not without challenge as some would come early and eat the best foods, leaving the scraps for those who were coming late, after a long day's work, which is why Paul urges them to think of the needs of others as they share around the community table.

As we share in communion at this table, we don't come for a potluck, but a simple meal of bread and juice. Simple elements that draw us together, that call us to focus on who Jesus was, how he lived, and how he's calling us to live as individuals and as community of faith together, being mindful of the needs of others. Celebrating the unity, we find in communion calls us out of our individualism, our exclusiveness, our divisiveness and into a unified meal where we discover something fundamental—that we are all in need of God's grace and love – and a community to share it with.

Unity and community is hard to maintain though when we walk away from this table of grace. Negativity, church gossip, fear of confrontation, unrealistic expectations, they all tear us down and apart... Every time we exclude; every time we turn our backs on others; every time we bicker and argue and separate ourselves from one another, we take a step further away from the communion table that draws us together as one body, one community of faith.

Communion is meant to be a portrait of unity. God calls us around the table to recognize that yes, we have many differences; yes, we have had misunderstandings and arguments; yes, we have not always understood the ways of others—but when we sit and break bread and eat with one another as a family, we all eat and drink the meal that creates the unity we've lost. It unifies us into the One Body of Jesus Christ.

Today, as we come to the Lord's Table, in a world deeply divided by political and ethnic and religious ideology, may this meal draw us together in unity... not uniformity, a conformity that says we all need to think alike – but unity. May we recognize around this table of fellowship that we may not all think alike or believe alike, but we CAN love alike. And not only CAN we, but we MUST. We need one another, despite our differences and everything that keeps us at arms lengths from one another...

Diana Butler Bass – church historian and writer speaks of table fellowship as resistance... for when you share a meal with people, even those you didn't think you could

like or get along with, people you might not have thought would or should be welcome at the table, you find yourself building connections with them, sharing life, and coming to realize that you have more in common than you thought. Rather than focusing on what separates you, you begin to see what unites you and binds you together. And then once you've stepped away from the table, the memories of the fellowship you shared go with you, and influence you in those moments when you least expect it... when someone begins to demean or threatens to harm the person you just connected with, you find yourself naturally resisting and pushing back on that in the name of justice... consciously or unconsciously working for the inclusion and celebration of that individual's inherent value. You might not come any closer to believing alike, but you've certainly gotten closer to loving alike, to the unity to which we are called.

It is my prayer this day that as we share in table fellowship, as we take this bread and cup, that we remember all that binds us together, the unity that calls us to love and serve others – even those that are different from us. As we share in this family meal, which nourishes body and spirit, take time to make eye contact, connecting with those around you. And may the unity you find at this table of grace inspire you to resistance of the hatred and division that our world draws us into each day. May it be so... Amen.