



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Communion

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

June 14, 2015

You all know that we have had a lot of funerals here at Trinity since Easter. We had two more in the last two days. At nearly every funeral, the gathered community has been invited to share communion. And so we've done a lot of that, too. I find joy every time I make that invitation and explain that absolutely everyone is welcome and that in this mystical meal we meet Christ and everyone else. Anglican Bishop N.T. Wright says that when Jesus wanted to explain what he was doing, "he didn't give a theory. He didn't give them a set of scriptural texts. He gave them a meal." He gave us the most ordinary thing so that we might become something more. Communion is the meal that makes us one, the Body of Christ. He didn't tell them what to think or believe, he told them to share a meal and to remember him.

Historically, the church has been very conflicted about communion. What is it, what happens in it, who gets to receive it. Lots of hurdles and hoops devised along the way. In her book *Searching for Sunday* Rachel Evans says, "The gospel doesn't need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting, "Welcome! There's bread and wine. Come eat with us and talk." This isn't a kingdom for the worthy; it's a kingdom for the hungry." (p. 167)

What is our hunger - what will fill us? Connection and community are what feed us in a world in which isolation has become the norm. In prison, isolation is the ultimate punishment. We do it to ourselves all of the time. Communion undoes isolation. The church was started around dinner tables. Communion reminds us to be a community that knows each other, shares what we have, takes care when there is a need and celebrates regularly. Isn't it lovely that celebration is our ordinary way of getting together.

There is a church in Brooklyn called St. Lydia's Dinner Church. Every Sunday and Monday evening, people come together and fix a meal in a storefront and then they light some candles, maybe sing something, they pray a Eucharistic prayer, the pastor breaks a loaf of bread and sends the two pieces around, communion happens in sharing and feeding each other. Then the meal is served. People talk, get to know each other. Some scripture and conversation happen. After supper, the cup is blessed and shared. Cleaning up together is a part of worship and by the end of the evening, no one leaves a stranger. The pastor says, "We do church this way because people are hungry. People in New York have hungry bellies that may be filled with home-cooked food. They have hungry souls that may be filled with holy text, holy conversation. And these hungers are sated when we come together and eat."

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I had my collar on the other day in the grocery store - not something that happens very often - and I ended up having a long conversation in the produce department with a man who was very concerned about his church. He wanted to know what I thought - what I was seeing. It's true - things have definitely changed for churches in America. There are lots of things to point to - cultural changes, scandals in the church, divisive issues - all of these things have changed the landscape around us and we do need to pay attention. I told him that I thought we needed to be asking ourselves the right questions. Not just how do we bring more people to church and get the ones we've got to be more involved, but questions that get to our very existence. What do people need? What do people find when they come here? Why do we come? Why would God want the church to exist? I think that in some ways, the answer to all of them is that the church is to be a different kind of community - an ideal community, not that we actually achieve an ideal but we know what the goal is. The church exists to be a place in which people know that they are loved, that the community is dedicated to the well being of those who are here and those who have not yet come. That's what God's story is all about - God loves us and all of creation. And so, we do communion to remind ourselves of what Jesus taught - that we are all one community, in Christ, in God as equals.

Michael Curry is the Bishop of NC and also one of the four candidates for Presiding Bishop. Communion has a very personal resonance for him. He tells the story of a young woman who had become an Episcopalian in 1940. She invited a man she was dating to come to church with her. They were both black; the church was completely white and it was in the heart of segregated America with separate water fountains for Colored folks. He watched from the pew as everyone went up for communion, he saw everyone drink from the cup and then his girlfriend did too. That day he decided that any church in which black and white drank from the same cup had discovered something powerful and he wanted to be a part of. Of course, they became Michael Curry's parents and he said that "communion is the sacrament of unity that overcomes even the deepest estrangements between human beings."

Our gospel today was about planting seeds even though we don't have any power to makes them sprout - the best you can do is to offer good soil and enough water and trust that the workings of creation will do the rest. Communion is many things and one of them is a seed. To offer this meal is to plant a seed in someone and trust that if it is to sprout and take root. Often we will never know what that looks like. I remember a moment at the Cathedral in Paris. Communion was celebrated at a wedding and all were invited as usual. Afterwards, an older gentleman approached me with tears running down his face. He took my hand and said "I haven't been able to take communion in 30 years. Thank you."

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Any time that we put a price on the grace that is communion I think we run the risk of really annoying Jesus. All he said was "whenever you break bread together, remember me." He didn't give us a list of qualifications, or things that get us put in eucharistic time-out. It's like Thanksgiving dinner - we don't withhold that from our children until they can tell us about the pilgrims. We all come together and take part because we are a part of God's beloved community.

I came across another writer from the conservative side of Christianity who was also discovering a hunger for communion. His name is Caleb Trimble and he is the Youth Pastor at a large church in suburban Chicago. He wrote about his experience as a worship planner and how he was always trying to cut down on the time spent on communion. He thought communion got in the way of what they were in church to do. He says, "I thought we gathered for worship. I thought we gathered for a sermon. I thought we gathered for a really cool element that would bring all the unchurched people to church. I thought we gathered so that we could go to heaven...I was wrong...We gather for communion. Because in communion, everything begins to make sense. In communion, friends and enemies come together. In communion, Christ's Kingdom is experienced. In communion, the church finds its hope. In communion, Christ is present and exalted."

I don't want to be smug about it but when Caleb finds that he really needs what communion offers, he looks for an Episcopal Church where the meal is not rushed but happens in sacred time and he feels Christ's presence as he is given the bread and wine and he feels Christ's presence in those kneeling next to him.

Communion - it is the sacred in the ordinary.

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