

**The Liturgy for June 7, 2020**

**The United Church of Canada: 95<sup>th</sup> Birthday**

**The Question:** *Why do we do Communion the way we do in the United Church, with grape juice and bread?*

**~Thought for Meditation:**

*At the inaugural service of the UCC, the elders of the three churches [becoming “United”] were carefully drilled for the dispensing of the sacrament, and so perfect was their discipline that 7,656 communicants were served in 27 ½ minutes.*

**The Rev. Dr. George Pidgeon, first Moderator of the UCC**

**~GATHERING:**

Hi everyone! Last week was the Feast of Pentecost, where we celebrated the birth of the church, and specifically the birth of the United Church of Canada. In just a few days, on June 10<sup>th</sup>, we are officially 95 years old. It is tradition to celebrate this day with communion which was certainly part of the very first service of the UCC. That got me remembering a communion we had a few years ago at Maritime Conference, all 500 of us. Afterwards someone said to me: That was the best communion service ever. So much singing and dancing and going forward together! Someone else said to me: That was the worst communion ever. So much singing and dancing and going forward! Welcome to Communion in the United Church of Canada!

**~LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE**

**~CALL TO WORSHIP**

**Leader:** The joy of Christ be with you!

**People:** And also with you!

**Leader:** Let's worship together!

**~OPENING PRAYER ENDING WITH THE LORD'S PRAYER**

O God, in whom we live and move and have our being:

**From generation to generation we have gathered in prayer and song.**

On this birthday of the church, when nothing is the way it was, we *still* give thanks for your care and guidance throughout the journey.

**More than ever, we seek the re-newing and re-finishing fire of the Spirit to impel us into our future.**

Come, Holy Spirit, come.

**Breathe into our hearts this day.**

Bless our worship, whether online or in print, and inspire us,

**That we may live Spirit-filled lives of love and compassion for all.**

And now we pray together, in the way of Jesus, saying:

**Our Father who art in heaven,  
Hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done,  
On earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
As we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation,  
But deliver us from evil,  
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,  
For ever and ever. Amen.**

**~Scripture: 1Corinthians 10: 15-17**

I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

**~Reflection: *On Bread and Cup and Privilege***

So we have an interesting history as a church: a blending of Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists.

As we discussed last week, this has affected our style of worship and theology, and our ways of social justice. It has also influenced our Table practices.

Over the years, when I have a conversation with United Church people about what it is they loved – or did not love – about a Communion service, it reveals a great deal about who they are, and their background or church heritage.

“I don’t like walking forward to take communion,” a woman once told me. She was referring to “communion by intinction,” (aka “rip and dip”) when people go forward and receive a piece of bread that they then dip into the cup. Some dislike this newer practice for hygiene reasons. But for this woman it was about going forward. “Everyone crowded in the aisle. I feel like everyone is looking at me. It doesn’t feel private and personal like it *should* feel.” She added, unnecessarily: “We were Presbyterian you know.” Oh, I know.

Presbyterian tradition teaches that the holiness of the Lord's Supper – Communion – is to be upheld by treating it in a most dignified, indeed sombre manner.

If your church tends to place a white tablecloth over all the elements, that is also from the Presbyterians: it was to provoke a sense of awe, holy mystery. And it was such a holy thing, that it might seem less so, if you had it too often. So, 4 times a year was plenty thank you very much. Besides... you have to beware too much ritual. And it is also the Presbyterian stream that brought us serving communion to folks as they stay seated. It is a sign that the meal is a gracious *gift* from God, given to us...not something we can go forward and get. Nothing we can do to earn it.

*We were Presbyterian you know.*

Ahhh, but we were also Methodists. They had an equally strong understanding of how to “do” the Lord's Supper *properly*. [I wonder if Jesus sighs at us a lot?]

Methodism grew out of Anglicanism, which grew out of Roman Catholicism, so the Methodist tradition was to have people *come forward* to receive communion: your coming to the altar was a sign of devotion to Jesus. It was about pure Spirit –filled joy.

### **The elements: Bread:**

In UCC tradition we use many forms of bread. Sometimes we use unleavened. This is to recognize that Christians see Jesus instituting a new meal form, that we call Communion during his Last Supper with his disciples. Please note: Jesus and the 12 were NOT celebrating communion. They were celebrating Passover, the high Jewish holy days, which always includes unleavened bread in remembrance of the Israelites need to rush to escape Egypt, taking their bread unleavened.

For us, the importance lies in the breaking and sharing of the bread, as Jesus's body was broken and his life shared with all. The specific kind matters not.

**Wine/Juice:** Now what goes in the cup though...that's a different story!

The Methodists and Presbyterians strongly supported the Temperance Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> C, which advocated for abstinence from alcohol. This was problematic as churches used wine for the sacrament of communion. Unfermented grape juice became an obvious substitute, but access to grapes to make into juice was not always easy. And it just didn't keep well. Enter Thomas Welch... a dentist by day, and a Methodist by faith, who pioneered the making of pasteurized grape juice. We still use it today in our

UCC churches. Not by “rule,” but by a desire to keep the table open to all, including children, those with addictions. I love that about us.

But communion hasn’t always been inclusive.

Sometimes a church will state that Communion is open to all...but then add a corollary: all who are baptized or all who are members, or all who are confirmed. You never hear me add that. I don’t believe in bouncers at the Table of Jesus. That is thanks to our Methodist heritage. In ecclesial language we say that the meal can be a “converting ordinance.” That the very act of sharing this sacred meal, one can feel the presence of God, and your life can be changed. So, it is not ours to withhold from anyone. It’s God’s gift this meal. So, please come.

### **And So We Come to the Table:**

However communion happens, it can appear to be a strange meal. Wee bites and sips. But it is a powerful meal. It is a meal with moral agency. As we come now to this meal, to whatever table or lap it is being served upon, I want to tell you a story that Michael Curry tells. He is the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church (USA). But maybe you recognize him because he presided at a certain royal wedding. But the story that hit me this week, was one he tells of his parents before they married. His mother was a young black woman in 1940s America. She attended an Episcopal church, and one day brought her boyfriend, also black. He was a little uneasy in this all-white congregation. As he watched her go forward for communion, he noticed that the priest offered a shared cup. He sat there in the pew figuring he knew what would happen when it was her turn. Instead he saw the priest lift the cup to her lips. The cup that had just been sipped by a white person was now sipped by a black person. He was astounded and knew that this was a moment. A moment that said despite all the racism and segregation he and his girlfriend experienced in their everyday lives, here was a sign: that this table, the ways of this strange meal, this is how Jesus expects us to live: as one. With no separation. We are to live and struggle and love not only at the table but in the world, as one.

But as we sit here though, knowing all that we know of the world these last few weeks, we cannot say that is true, can we?

We watched a young man, out for a run, be killed. Because he was black. A man out quietly bird watching has a white woman calling the authorities, claiming he is black and dangerous.

My friend and colleague Yvette Swan, a UCC minister, a Black woman, can tell you that if she comes down from Taymouth, she has gone into store in Fredericton and realizes she is being watched with suspicion by the store clerk. Watched to see if she is shoplifting. That doesn’t happen to me.

So I come to this table today and acknowledge the ways I hold privilege, the privilege of being a woman in a white body; a privilege that is contrary to the ways of Jesus.

As I break the bread, I recall Jesus, who sat at a table and said this is my body, given for you.

As I lift the cup, I recall Jesus who said this is the new covenant, a new way of being.

Jesus said: Do this in remembrance of me.

In remembrance of what his life stood for: that we are to live and struggle and love as one: without separation.

Jesus stood for love and peace, to be sure. But make no mistake, he was really good at making people uncomfortable. I've been thinking a lot about that this week.

As you and I, as we all partake of this meal, may we acknowledge our need to listen to the voices around us that remind us of our privilege; that make us uncomfortable. In Jesus' name.

++++ *we share the meal* +++++

### ~**The Benediction**

At that inaugural service of the United Church of Canada 95 years ago, there was no common cup as there was in Bishop Curry's story. But something happened that astounded the press that was gathered: After distribution of the elements, the bread and those individual cups, the presider asked that they all wait, in order to eat together: as one. Since then, simultaneous communion has become the beloved custom in the United Church of Canada: that all may be one.

Here then, is our work of the table.

Our work for the coming days,

The work for our lifetime.

Jesus never said it would be easy. But he promised to be with us always, even unto the end of the age.

Amen and amen.