

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on World Communion Sunday, October 4, 2009 based on 1 Corinthians 11:17-26.

Pass the Plate – The Meal that Divides/Unites Us

A man reports-*"I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. I immediately ran over and said "Stop! Don't do it!"*

"Why shouldn't I?" He said.

I said, "Well, there is so much to live for!"

"Like what?"

"Well...are you religious or not?"

"Religious."

"Me too! Are you Christian or Jewish?"

"Christian."

"Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

"Protestant."

"Me too!" Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

"Baptist."

"Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

"Baptist Church of God."

"Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God."

"Reformed Baptist Church of God."

"Me too!" Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915.

"Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!"

To which I said, "Die, heretic scum!" And pushed him off the bridge.

I thought this was an appropriate story to begin my World Communion message. World Communion Sunday is the day that Christians around the world break the bread and shares the cup in Jesus' name. It is a day to celebrate our oneness in Christ!

However, it is also a day to acknowledge that communion is one of the major things that divides us as Christians. The meal that is supposed to unite, divides. This too is the reality of this day.

Today there are Roman Catholic Christians and Greek Orthodox Christians and Lutheran Christians and Coptic Christians and Methodist Christians and Baptist Christians, and independent Protestant Christians, and we all have our ideas and customs about communion! The act that is supposed to bring us together - separates us.

The issue is that Jesus gave us a symbolic act at the last supper. He broke bread and shared a cup and then talked about his body and blood. Over time, different interpretations have developed around what that symbolic act and those words means. Let me give you an example of how our interpretation over communion divides us:

(Show a picture of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli) This is a picture of Martin Luther of Wittenberg, Germany and Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich, Switzerland. They both lived 500 years ago in the early 1500s. Perhaps you are familiar with Martin Luther. He is the guy who protested the practices of the Roman Catholic Church by nailing 95 theses to the door of the Roman Church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517. This act led to the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

Ulrich Zwingli is probably less familiar. He started his own reform movement in Zurich shortly after Luther. Eventually, the churches of his area became known as the Reformed Church. We don't know Zwingli as well as Luther because in addition to be a pastor and theologian, Zwingli also saw himself as a military chaplain, and he went out with the troops of his town to fight the Catholics in 1531 in full armor and a double edged sword and got himself killed. Many of his ideas were expanded and modified by a Christian who came later named John Calvin who became the theologian behind both the Reformed and Presbyterian movement.

Anyway, in 1529, Luther and Zwingli met up in the mountains of Marburg, Germany to see if they could bring their reformation movements together and thus be stronger. They had 15 principles to discuss. They agreed on 14. They could not agree on communion.

They both agreed that the bread and wine did not turn into the actual body and body of Jesus like the Catholics practiced. This was the Roman position known as “transubstantiation.” They both agreed that the laity should take the bread and cup and have it more often. 500 years ago in Europe, communion had been taken away from the people. It was considered so sacred that they clergy did not share it with the laity. Communion was served everyday and in some cathedrals every hour, but only the clergy received it and the words were always in Latin. The laity only received communion once a year on Easter and then only the bread.

Luther and Zwingli agreed that communion was for everyone – both the bread and the cup should be shared and that people should understand the words being said. But for 3 days they argued over 10 words – “This is my body” and “Do this in remembrance of me.” You heard those words from Paul in scripture today.

Luther had been a Catholic priest. So even though he didn’t believe in transubstantiation, he still believe that the body of Christ was “in, with, and under” the bread. Hence he emphasized “this is my body.” For Zwingli, the sign of communion was to remember the once and for all sacrifice Jesus made for our salvation. For him, it was a memorial feast of having the body and blood of Christ in our mind as we ate the bread and drank from the cup. Thus for Zwingli, he emphasized, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

For 3 days they went back and forth on the meaning of those 10 words. In the end, they could not agree, and they went their separate ways - divided. Today there are still 3 basic understandings of Christian communion – (transubstantiation, presence, memorial feast), and we are still divided when we communion.

They seemed to be divided in Corinth as well. The reason why Paul shares the words of how to do communion in what his now our scripture is because he was upset about how the Corinthian’s were doing it. In scripture, we get the idea that communion was part of a fellowship meal. Sharing the Lord’ Supper was part of eating together.

But Paul criticizes them because they were not in community when they ate. They were not together. In those days it was not uncommon for people to be divided by class and station. People of higher class expected better food and preferential

treatment. This was also happening within the congregation. People brought their own food and ate what they brought while others went hungry. Apparently, the church had not invented the church potluck yet. They hadn't invented the idea of being different but together in Christ. They were still working on what it meant to be in community together in Christ.

Paul explains it to them – in the broken bread and poured cup, Jesus gave us a shared experience of community and sacrifice. Do this in remembrance of him.

There are times that we take communion alone, but the reason we do it in a body is because it is meant to be a community experience. We may be in different places in our faith journey, we may believe different things, we may have different spiritual gifts, we may look different, but when we come to the table, we are one in Christ. There is no difference. In fact in I Corinthians 12, Paul carries on this theme of oneness by talking about the variety of spiritual gifts and services and the different ways we use and share our gifts, but it is the same Spirit that gives it for we are all one in the body of Christ.

Paul reminds us that Jesus made a sacrifice on the cross so that we can come together in the shadow of the cross to experience community and togetherness.

One of the favorite places that I like to take people on a mission trip is a place called the Emmaus Home in Marthasville, Missouri. The Emmaus Home was started over 100 years ago in a rural area west of St. Louis as a home for adults with limited mental abilities. I like to take people there because back in the 1960s, one man transformed life for the people who lived there.

For the first 60 years of its existence, the Emmaus Home was a place for people with mental restrictions could be warehoused when no one else could care for them. There was pretty much a men's dormitory and a women's dormitory, and grown men and women slept and lived in large rooms with many beds.

But in the 1960s, the Emmaus Home called a minister to be the executive director of the home. The minister began to get to know the residents, and what he came to realize was that he was more like the people of Emmaus than different from

them. They were more alike than unlike. If they were more alike than unlike then he could not justify how the residents were living.

He began to talk to the board of directors and the staff about how to do it different. They came up with the idea that if they were going to be a "home", then they would create homes. Money was raised to build group homes on the grounds, and residents were grouped by abilities with a house parent to live together as a family unit. A sheltered workshop was built and contracts were sought to produce something. Residents would leave their home, go to work at the sheltered workshop, clock in, do their job, go home after work, do their home duties, and have private time.

Residents who worked at the sheltered workshop or in other jobs at the home were paid for their services and in turn helped pay for their room and board. The Emmaus Home became transformed. It became a community of adults, many of whom happened to have some limits. In fact, after about 12 years, several residents were able to move off campus and get an apartment and job in town. All of this happened because one man believed that we are more alike than we are unlike.

That mantra has transformed my life because I think Jesus thought this way as well. Jesus seemed to indicate that we are more alike than unlike and acted accordingly.

I can't tell you how many times remembering that we are more alike than unlike has helped me - When someone is acting harsh, it is helpful to remember that we are more alike so that I don't respond in kind. When I meet someone who looks different from me, when I remember that we are more alike than unlike, I look for what we have in common. When I meet people from a different religion or culture, if I remember that we are more alike than different, I can usually find the common ground to be in community.

We have a choice in life. We can emphasize our differences or learn what we have in common and find community in our oneness. Jesus taught us how to be one – not fused together so that we have no individuality – not so distant from each other that we can not see how we are connected to each other – but connected to each other in mutual understanding and respect.

Communion teaches us about community. Communion teaches us that we are connected but not the same, bound together but not diminished by that connection. In the broken bread and shared cup, Jesus gave us the shared experience of connection and sacrifice. We come to the table different but connected, one but diverse.

Jesus gave us a sign and a shared experience to be one in him. When we can get past the words and the walls of division, we see people bound together in faith, hope, and love to be Christ alive and working together for the glory of God and a better world. That's the power of passing the plate for a meal that unites us. Amen.