

“What Are You Looking For?”

New London UMC

Sunday, Aug. 1, 2021

John 6:24-35 *The Message*; Ephesians 4:1-16 *NRSV*

Rev. Joyce Rich

I believe that our sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion embody a holy intimacy, and a specific connection that the Holy Spirit seems to flow through. So I appreciate what the Apostle Paul has written in his letter to the Ephesians about the “unity of the Spirit” with one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God, and one hope to which we have been called. However, we all know that this sense of “oneness” – especially within our United Methodist denomination – has been seriously tested in recent years, and thoroughly stretched in new ways during this pandemic. In clergy circles we have had conversations we never thought we would have about worship in general, and sacraments in particular, that were triggered by the dilemma of our congregations not being physically together in worship. You may also have questioned what makes worship “worship” when it was deemed “safer” to have an internet connection replace the physical connection within the Body of Christ. It seems odd to think that it was once just a personal risk to try to hit a really high or really low note in a hymn; but now simply trying to sing a hymn together is labelled a “high risk activity”!

In addition to these new health risk concerns, we continue to have conversations about where The United Methodist Church is headed. Some people feel that our denomination is a little too loosey-goosey when it comes to church doctrine in general, much less sacramental practices – despite the fact that we have *The Book of Discipline*, *The Book of Resolutions*, *The Book of Worship*, and multiple United Methodist hymnals to help guide us along the way. But I have to tell you, it still seemed pretty strange to me last year to be in Zoom gatherings of United Methodist clergy who were questioning if it was “orthodox” – or correct understanding and practice – to share the Prayer of Great Thanksgiving over Zoom or Facebook live with little windows of people who would break their own bread and drink from their own cup. And we wondered, “What becomes of the sacredness of the sacrament in a recorded worship service if people can skip over or fast forward through it?” And as the pandemic months continued we went on to discuss what could be considered relatively “safe” ways to share in the sacraments once we re-started in-person worship services. There have been no easy answers because many of the things that had always seemed so integral, so *essential* to our sacraments had now become worrisome and problematic – if not downright dangerous.

I know that some of you have *never* wanted to receive Holy Communion through intinction – the dipping of a piece of bread into the cup. Breaking off a piece of bread and handing it to someone else to dip into a common cup? How many contact points do we have there? But it’s also true that passing trays of pieces of bread; and passing trays of open, individual cups, through the pews or shoulder to shoulder at the communion rail,

could create a “super spreader” event. . . . And thus we have the individual, sealed mini-chalice that holds both a small piece of bread and a little grape juice. This mini-chalice may be about as “safe” a way as there is to share the elements today – but I think it makes it harder to imagine Jesus blessing and breaking the seal on the bread and handing it to you as he says, “Take and eat. This is my body broken for you.” And Jesus blessing and lifting the seal on the cup of his blood of the new covenant poured out for you, and for many, for the forgiveness of sins – and inviting us to drink from it. . . . I sincerely hope and pray that our remembrance of the mighty acts of Jesus will not be lost amidst all of the bits of packaging, and that we will still experience the presence of the one living Christ with us. That we will know that what God is really offering to us is the bread from heaven, the real Bread of Life. And that the truly holy sacredness is found in our wholehearted acceptance of the bread that God is offering to us.

Jesus said that if we can make that connection of acceptance of God’s gift with our need, and we can align ourselves with the Bread of Life, then our individual hungers and our individual thirsts can be satisfied. That in our accepting the Bread of Life we also accept the calling to continue to nurture one another. And if we can humbly come together in the unity of the Spirit with Jesus and one another, we can deeply sink our roots in and grow to greater maturity by sharing in the richness of all of our diverse gifts. That it will be to everyone’s benefit if we continue to be humble and gentle and patient with each other, and truly work at maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Now I’m not saying that doing this is EASY. I’m saying that it is *worth it* to work at doing this.

It is worth it to look for the gifts that each person has and to be grateful for them – because God has given *none of us* ALL of the gifts we will need to sort out every problem that comes along, and to find the way through every twist and turn of life. Each of us needs ALL of us because we’re all part of the same loaf of bread – the Bread of Life. Chew on that for a moment.

Thanks be that we are called to be part of ONE body, ONE Spirit, ONE Lord, ONE faith, ONE God – who is above all and through all and in all!

Amen.