

“This is Us: Communion Table”

1 Corinthians 11: 23-29

Within the religious tradition, there is a frequently asked question, which is “Why do we do what we do?” This question comes in many different forms. Within the Jewish tradition, it is part of the Passover liturgy. A child will ask, “Why is this night different from any other?” Then for the remainder of the Passover meal, the story of how God brings God’s people out of slavery in Egypt is told and enacted through the elements shared during the meal. Within the Christian tradition, the question of “why we do what we do” is asked at the beginning of our Hanging of the Greens Service. Then throughout the service, we tell the story of Jesus’ birth through symbols and customs so that we will not forget what our God has done for us as God’s people.

So it is no surprise this question of why do we do what we do is often posed to us Disciples in regards to our practice of taking communion each Sunday. Because not many other denominations do what we do. They often partake in communion once a year or once every few months. But for us disciples, communion is an every week practice. So much so that if we are running behind schedule in worship, we will forgo the sermon rather than miss an opportunity to take communion. The way Disciples see it is, in the act of communion, we still

receive a Word of God for the people of God. It is a word about God's grace. It is a word about God's life changing love. It is a word about how God's abundance abounds. The act of communion tells us something very different than what this world usually tries to get us to believe.

Yet, there is more to our story regarding the practice of weekly communion. It goes beyond simply being people who like to eat and eat often. It goes beyond a ritual which we do on Sunday mornings. For us to understand how deep our connection as Disciples of Christ really is to the gathering around the Table with one another, to the breaking of the bread, to the drinking of the cup of the new covenant, we need to refresh our memory with a little history lesson. We need to go back some two thousand years which brings us to our text today.

In looking at our text, we may remember that Paul is writing to the group in Corinth. Word has gotten back to him that they are behaving in ways which do not reflect the principles of God's grace and love. Instead, rather, this church is arguing and fighting. This church is trying to figure out who is the greatest. All their words, all their actions are dividing them instead of building up the Body of Christ here on Earth.

So Paul writes to them, reminding them of their call to live in unity as brothers and sisters in faith. He reminds them one of the ways they proclaim this unity to the world is by partaking in the Lord's Supper together, as one.

I'll admit this doesn't sound like ground breaking advice. After all, it is what we do each Sunday. We invite all to partake in the Lord's Supper, all eating from the bread together, all drinking from the cup together, all in one place. But that wasn't how it was done in Corinth and exactly why Paul needed to write... to remind them of why we do what we do when it comes to the Lord's Supper.

So back to our history lesson... We need to remember that during this time, people were not gathering in church buildings on Sunday morning for worship. They were gathering at people's homes. The house needed to be large enough to host a group of about 10-20 or more people. So what this meant for the community of faith was that they gathered in a house owned by someone who was fairly wealthy. This was because usually only the wealthiest had homes large enough to hold a group that size.

We also need to remember is that when people gathered around the table, they didn't pull up chairs to sit. Instead, they usually reclined around the table. This limited the available space in the room. The reason why this piece of information is important is because when it came time to celebrate the Lord's

Supper, only a few people could actually gather around the table. The rest had to take seats in another room. And let's just say this, the people who usually got a spot at the table, were wealthy and powerful.

The rich and powerful were specifically chosen to be at the main table because that was how the Corinthian culture worked. It was part of the social structure to favor the wealthy. The Corinthian culture honored the rich. It thrived on setting up divisions based on class.

Okay, so picture it. Word has gotten back to Paul that when it came time for celebrating the Lord's Supper in the Corinthian church, part of the group went into one room while the rest went into another. And if that wasn't enough to make Paul's skin crawl, this next part certainly sent him over the edge. Paul was told that when it came to serving the meal, the choice foods were put in the actual dining room with the wealthy while the rest of the group ate whatever could be scrounged together or ate nothing at all.

Paul realized that the group in the dining room was treating this gathering, this gathering which was supposed to be celebrating the Lord's supper, Paul realized that this group was treating it as their own personal meal. They were completely forgetting why they do what they do as disciples of Jesus. They were

completely forgetting that the table was God's table, not their own personal potluck.

So it is no surprise that Paul becomes furious as he writes this part of the letter. He reams them up one side and down the other. He tells them this was not their own personal party. That what they were celebrating and remembering is a moment which brings to mind Jesus' death and sacrifice. The Lord's Supper shows us as people of faith, shows us over and over again just how far God's love extends. Paul is furious that the Corinthians were ignoring their call to come together as one Body of Christ and proclaim that there is another way.

That's part one of our history lesson. The second part comes a little bit later during the 1800's in Scotland when one of the Disciples of Christ founders has a revelation about the Church's practice of communion at that time. This founder's revelation is very similar to what Paul shared with Corinthians about their practices concerning Lord's Supper in our text today.

During the 1800's, in lots of sanctuaries, it was common for the area around the Table to be fenced off, creating a physical barrier between the people and God. It was also common practice during that time for the minister to administer tests to see if people were worthy or not of taking communion. These tests ranged from having people recite certain creeds and scriptural texts to whether or not the

minister liked you or not. If the person passed the “test” and the minister deemed him or her worthy of taking communion, that person was given a token. Then when it was time to partake of communion, if you had a token, you would place the token in a tray. Then and only then, would you receive the bread and the cup. If you didn’t have a token, well, you were passed over.

So the story goes on a particular Sunday in 1809, Alexander Campbell watched as members who attended the church the longest and the most powerful members in the congregation were invited to the Table first while others who had been deemed not worthy were left out from the very practice which was supposed to unify God’s people. Alexander Campbell kept watching as person after person came forward while others were ignored until finally he had enough. When it came to be his turn, he threw down his token and left the building.

One scholar described that moment as “the ring of the token, as it fell into the tray, likened to the ring of Martin Luther’s hammer on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, announcing the renunciation of old church ties and marked the moment of which he forever ceased to recognize the claims or authority of a human creed to bind upon men the conditions of their acceptance with God”.

In other words, like Paul, for Alexander Campbell, the words we say at the Table shape our mission and ministry as disciples of Christ, especially since these

words start with the phrase... For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you..." Our gathering at the Lord's Table is vitally connected with our memory of Jesus, to our memory of the one who broke bread with the people on the margins, to our memory of the one who called us to care for the least of these. Our gathering that the Lord's Table is vitally connected with our memory of Jesus and because of that, every time we break the bread of life together, every time we drink from the cup of the new covenant together, Communion becomes an act of justice making. It becomes a way for us to tell a different story. It becomes a way for us to break down the barriers that this world insists on putting up, barriers to keep others in while keeping others out. Each and every we gather at the Table or any of the other tables which fill our lives, it becomes an act of justice making because through the bread and the cup, we are reminded and we remember that where we gather is God's Table, not our table. For just as we received for the Lord, we also hand on to others...we extend the invitation for all to come and be welcome as Beloved Children of God.

So today and all days, may we remember that what we do here in worship, in mission, in fellowship, in study as Midway Christian Church is not just some story. It is not just history. Our narrative as Midway Christian Church, as people of faith, more importantly as disciples of Christ, is about how love and hope came into being through Jesus Christ and transformed the world. It is the story of how our

everyday lives are intertwined with the holy and sacred. It is a story about how we are transforming into the people of hope, the people of love, the people of WELCOME God calls us to be so that the Kingdom of God comes to life more and more here on this Earth. So Midway Christian Church...in worship, in fellowship, in mission, and in study...This is Us, telling our story as the people of God. Amen.