**Communion – the Great Equalizer**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**August 27, 2017**

Psalm 65

1 Corinthians 11: 17-34 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Here at the Living Spirit Centre, as three congregations sharing the building and exploring other ways to share, I often say it is a ministry full of opportunity and challenge. There is much opportunity for what we can do together and there are the challenges of how we do share worship and ministry given our different traditions, theology, and liturgical practices. This summer we had three services where we worshipped together, attending a service, led by one of the congregations in their tradition - what we called ‘church crashing’. Although each congregation was to lead in their tradition, we acknowledged the importance of having communion each service and in offering communion, prepared the elements such that each member of the body could receive it in their own tradition, so we provided wine, juice, and the common cup. This honouring each of our traditions, was a way of celebrating our diversity and creating unity, honouring our difference.

Today within the Narrative Lectionary that Eastside follows, which provides the weekly readings for worship, we continue a series on Sacraments, with the next two weeks being about Communion. In the 1st Corinthians passage, Paul is emphasizing the importance of communion as a time to bring the community together in unity and equity. Unfortunately for the community in Corinth, the opposite is happening. At that time in the church, communion took place during the regular meal. The community gathered and shared a meal together, celebrating communion as part of the meal. However, in the Greco-Roman culture of the time, there was very distinct social strata and class, including slavery that affected how people ate together. The more wealthy would eat first and get the best food and wine, the less wealthy and slaves would eat last and get less and poorer quality food. Also there was no Sabbath or days off, so those who had to work or who were slaves, would get to the meal late and the richer folk would have already eaten and been drinking and as such they would be full and drunk by the time the rest arrived. Thus, Paul was criticizing this practice, which was unacceptable because communion was supposed to demonstrate the unity of the church and bring the community together through the grace of God shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus. As such when celebrated, communion is counter cultural. In bringing the community together, and providing the same grace and love in the receiving, regardless of who you are, communion radically challenges the cultural norms of inequality, both then and now. It brings the community together in unity. Regardless of who we are, being and feeling welcomed to the table is a powerful message of love and grace.

When I was growing up as a child, our church tradition in The United Church at the time was that you did not, could not receive communion until you were confirmed. There were many times I remember being held down when the members of the congregation were asked to stand because I was not yet a confirmed member. I was too young to really understand why this was, I just felt the exclusion of it and that it wasn’t fair that I could not participate fully as everyone else, even though I came to church every Sunday like them. I remember one time when we were in The Pas, visiting my uncle and went to their United Church. When the time for communion to be served came, they passed a loaf of bread around, (instead of a tray of bread cubes) and I was not sitting beside my mom (who was the enforcer of the tradition). So I took some of the bread and the juice also when it came around. I took advantage of the opportunity to be able to participate. ( I think my cousins who were younger than me received it as well). I remember the look from my mom – you know, ‘the look’! She spoke to me afterwards asking ‘why did you take communion when you knew you weren’t supposed to?!’ – she asked was it because it was served differently? I said yes that was it, knowing full well that I did it because the opportunity presented itself that I could participate and feel included. This was very important to me, and it is because of this feeling of exclusion that I am such a strong advocate for the inclusion of children into the life and work of the church in my ministry. In the 80’s the United Church had a big study on Christian Initiation and a vote on changing our manual, which would be our canon – the rules and doctrine for the church – to allow children to receive communion. In the end the vote failed, but while the language did not change, the understanding within the church did, because of the education, and so did the practice. So the Church now welcomes children to the table regardless of being confirmed. The language in our doctrine of ‘making a credible profession of faith’ changed from an understanding that this meant being confirmed to recognizing that we make a personal expression of commitment, of faith, when receiving communion.

While the ways we carry out or celebrate communion may differ, the meaning is the same. One of those ways that churches can differ is when the celebrant – the minister/pastor/priest - receives the elements of bread and wine or juice. In Anglo-Catholic traditions the priest receives and consumes the elements first as the representative of Christ offering the Eucharistic sacrifice first and receiving it before offering it to others. In the reformed traditions, including the United Church, we serve the people first, and the minister receives last, upholding the image of Christ as servant. The meaning and message of communion is not changed regardless of these different perspectives on what is important, the practice is just different. There is still the unity of the celebration that we come together as one to receive God’s grace. There can be difference, and still have unity. This is what we mean when we talk about unity in diversity.

Communion is counter-cultural. It brings together a diverse community – young and old, rich and poor, black and white, queer and straight, temporarily abled and disabled, and offers the same message of grace, forgiveness and love. In the celebration and in the elements, we receive and experience the presence of Christ. In receiving the bread and juice, we receive the gift of Jesus’ body and blood, given for us. We remember his life and love, and take in that we are to live in the same way. I heard a few years ago, when at an event in the US, about the phrase used in the Episcopal tradition: *Behold what you are, Receive what you may become*. I noticed this summer that Nancy, the priest for St. Philip, uses it in her communion words. I have incorporated it into mine as well, appreciating the message that in receiving communion, we receive the presence of Christ in and with us, and are called to live as he did. We are to be the presence of Christ in the world. In communion, we celebrate that presence and receive Christ into us, empowering us to go into the world to be Christ.

Christ’s presence transforms communities. Communion brings us together as one in Christ. As such, it is the great equalizer, calling us to celebrate God’s presence in and with us, and to live that love and grace in our lives as we go out into the world. May it be so.