

Sermon September 3, 2023 Dianne Droster preaching

Pastor and theologian Frederick Buechner tells a story about a moment in the woods, a moment of communion:

I REMEMBER A spring or so ago walking with a friend through a stand of maple trees at sugaring time, Buechner writes. The sap buckets were hung from the trees, and if you were quiet, you could hear the sap dripping into them: all through the woods falling into a thousand buckets or more hung out in the early spring woods with the sun coming down in long shafts through the trees.

The sap of a maple is like rainwater, very soft, and almost without taste except for the faintest tinge of sweetness to it, and when my friend said he'd never tried it, I offered to give him a taste. I had to unhook the bucket from the tap to hold it for him, and when he bent his head to drink from it, I tipped the bucket down to his lips, and just as he was about to take a sip, he looked up at me and said, " I have a feeling you ought to be saying some words."

Well, my friend is no more or less religious than the next person, and we'd been chattering on about nothing in particular as we walked, joking around, until I tipped the bucket to his lips so he could taste for the first time the taste of the lifeblood of a tree. And of course, for a moment those unsaid words fell through the air of those woods like the shafts of sun, and it was no joke because the whole place became another place or became more deeply the place it truly was; and he and I became different, something happened for a second to the air around us and between us, in us.

The word communion comes from the Latin for common, and I've been wondering about what it is in the sharing of communion that helps us hold each other in common, that, like in the Buechner story, changes us and gathers together on common ground, that gives us a common story, that urges us to the common good?

I'd like for you to think for a moment about your first experiences of communion.

Maybe communion happened for you organically, when you were a child, sitting in your parent or guardian's lap, and being fed a piece of bread from the passing plate, given a sip juice from one of the little cups. Or maybe you didn't take it until you were an adult. Or maybe today is the first time you will be having communion or sharing communion with all of us! Cool! Welcome!

Our Gospel story today has a way of reminding me of my first time I shared in communion here, in this sanctuary, I suppose in part because like the disciples, I didn't really have any clue what was going on until the moment that the bread was broken and passed and shared,

Now I've written before about my reluctant and unplanned return to church after a thirty-year absence, when I wandered into this Sanctuary on a Pentecost Sunday in search of something I couldn't find, a longing I couldn't satisfy, a hole in my heart that I couldn't fill.

As it happened, my first Sunday here coincided with the discovery of a long lost hearing loop, so that folks with audio aids could switch on their tee coils and hear better – and while I didn't wear a hearing aid, all that first summer I came here and I felt like my inner-tee coil was buzzing, as I listened to the preachers tell about God the extravagant Gardner casting love seeds, about how nothing can separate us from God's love, about how Jesus spoke truth to power and welcomed the outcast and was kind to the stranger and and loved us til the end.

I had even come to mostly believe those words of welcome: that no matter who I was or where I was on life's journey I was welcome here.

But because of family vacations, and Lawrence graduation, it wasn't until the end of that summer, that I attended on a first Sunday of the month, when communion is served here.

Now, at my childhood church, only adult members could take communion and they were required to fill out a registration card with one of those mini orange pencils, checking off boxes, pledging that they were baptized and confirmed, that they were members of this particular church, and also that they were unworthy and unclean, that they repented of their sins, and that affirmed the Apostles Creed. Then they signed and dated the cards.

The usher would nod for folks to stand up by pew row and precede to the center aisle, where the usher would check their card, then they would walk in an orderly fashion to the front of church, wait, until they were signaled to come up to the alter rail, where they would kneel and be served communion.

One Sunday I waited in the pew by myself as my parents went up for communion, and then an usher was suddenly standing right behind me, and in a loud whisper said "Don't!" and he snatched the pencil out of my hand because I had been doodling on one of those registration cards.

Now, here in this Sanctuary, it didn't take long for me to realize that the pencils in the pew rack were for prayer cards and not for a required registration, and the ushers — who included all sexes, shapes and sizes of people — were not acting like bouncers.

And I had felt the buzz of my inner tee-coil when the Pastor said those beautiful words of invitation, the call to the table — the same words we'll be hearing in a few minutes:

"We are an open communion church, meaning that we require no faith confession or specific church membership to join us at table. These gifts, " he said, pointing to the table, "are for all those who wish to know the presence of Christ and the community of Christ's people."

"The gifts of God for the people of God," and he held his arms wide to indicate that meant all of us. "Come for all is now ready."

There were no categories of who could share in this meal, there was no checking off of boxes, no formal pledging about beliefs, no signing of our names,

This was a wide open a table, with plenty of room, and enough to fill everyone.

And still, I wasn't sure if I could go through with it. Maybe something of that ushers harsh voice from long ago was whispering in my head. Don't! Don't! Don't!

But Communion was coming my way whether I wanted it or not, coming in the traditional congregational way, with the elements passed from hand to hand.

I watched as the servers drew near. I understood the basic maneuver: take, pivot, and deposit.

Kind of like a communion conveyer belt.

That seemed simple enough.

Now all that summer, I had been sitting in the wrong way section, that one right there, facing across the Sanctuary
(By the way, I call that spot over there the piece of pie section. I didn't yet know that this place was designed with an old Congregation Meeting house in mind, that all these angles were intentional)

So, there I was in wrong way section, in the same place I had first sat the first Sunday I slunk in here, so desperate in my loneliness.

I had been sitting between two pairs of older folks. To my immediate left, a man who always wore a crisply pressed pin stripe suit, that day in charcoal gray, and then next to him, his wife, with beautifully coiffed silver hair, and matching earrings, purse, and shoes, often in bright red.

To my immediate right, a tall bald man, also in a suit and tie, who always hummed along with the choir whenever they sang.

Well, on came the plate of bread and I was ready to grab it, pivot and hand it off like a football or a hot potato.

But as I reached out my hands to take it from the gray pin-striped suit man, he held on, and my eyes immediately went from the plate, to his face, and for the first I really looked at him, really saw him, and he was smiling at me. Our eyes locked for a second.

And then tenderly and gently he handed me the plate, as if he were handing me a butterfly.

And as I took the plate, I felt the paradox, of both feeling something heavy with meaning and significance in my hands, and yet so light and delicate and precious.

And then the butterfly was beating in my heart, and when I pivoted and went to hand the plate of bread to the tall bald man, he was also beaming at me, and I felt like I was giving something more, when I passed the bread – some of whatever I had been given, but again paradoxically, in the giving something, I was receiving more of it.

And while I wouldn't officially join the church for few months after, I become a member that day, a member of the body of Christ, of this body of Christ,

Not because
I passed a test
Or all my doubts disappeared
Or my unorthodox and sometimes wildly ranging thoughts about God were somehow tamed or conformed to a one size fits standard

But because of the deeper bonds of kindness and charity, of our common lot, and the feeling that even I too could pass on love to others, God's love, here in a shared meal, in a feast of love, in remembrance of the one who so loved the world.

It would be another year, before I became Stephen minister and a few more months after that when I would visit the pin-striped suit man, now in a nursing home after a stroke, and share communion with him, even though he could no longer swallow the bread or drink from the cup.

And I would visit his beautifully coiffed widow and sit with her her and remember

And I would pray with the tall bald man at the bedside of his wife in hospice.

I would go all of their funerals.

They are all gone, gone from this earthly life, but I can look out even now at the wrong way section and understand truly what is meant by the communion of saints and the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us.

Which leads us to the story of today, the story of this communion, the story that's right here in front of us.

Maybe every time we share in this meal together, it is a first time, a first time to hear those sweet words of invitation sweep over us and calls us all together for this moment for connection, to hear for the first time, the story of how Jesus lived for us, for the first time to look into the shining faces next to us as we pass the plates, and feel God's love pass between us, connecting us anew, in mysterious, and timeless, and endless ways.
Amen.