

August 5, 2018 • Holy Communion • 11th Sunday in Kingdomtide

**BIND OUR HEARTS IN LOVE – SUMMER SERMON SERIES**

**“Bound Together”**

Homily by the Rev. Patricia Farris

*Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-14*

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,*

*with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.*



On the first Sunday of the month, we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Let me address up front a question that visitors frequently ask: if I'm not a United Methodist, can I come up and receive communion? The answer is “yes.”

That's different from some of the churches some of us grew up in. Only Catholics are to receive communion in a Catholic mass, though admittedly some priests are more open-minded about that than others. In Episcopal churches, only those who have been baptized are to participate. Some denominations don't allow children to participate until after Confirmation. In Southern Baptist churches, only those who have been baptized by complete immersion are to come forward. That practice was what drove my own Southern Baptist-raised father to become a Methodist after he'd become engaged to my mother, a Presbyterian baptized by sprinkling.

Each group has its own reasons for its rules and regulations. But I love our United Methodist practice. I love saying, as I invite us to the table, something like “in the United Methodist Church, the table of the Lord is open to all—member of this church or none, convicted of faith or full of doubt, regular attendee or first time visitor, young or old, male or female, gay or straight, any nationality, race, ethnicity, culture, language....the table of the Lord is open to all.”

And you know what? If it's a problem to get up here to the table, we'll bring it to you---we'll bring it to you in your pew, we'll bring it across this campus to everyone in Simkins Hall and the Nursery, and our in-home communion servers will even bring it to you in your home.

Methodists don't practice this just out of convenience or concern for the ushers who would otherwise become gatekeepers. And we don't do it out of a genteel sense of hospitality and manners. We do it because of what we believe this is all about.

We believe this sacrament is first and foremost about what God is doing in our lives, in each of us, and in our fellowship. Methodists talk about God's grace a lot. And what John Wesley meant by that, what we mean today, is that when we partake of the bread and the cup, God is right here and through grace will touch our hearts and change our lives. We believe that God so loves us, each and every one of us, that God will always show up in this holy meal to pour that love into our hearts. So if we come with joyful and eager hearts, God is here. If we come with a wait-and-see approach, God is here. If we come with anger or grief or deep doubts, God is here. If we come not knowing if we want much of anything to do with “church” or “religion,” God is here. The table of the Lord is open to all, because God's love is for all.

Moreover, Methodists also believe that a new community of love is created in and through this sacrament, this “sacrament of belonging.” Something happens when we all receive of the one loaf and drink of the one cup. Jesus said: “This is my body broken for you. This is the cup of the new covenant, my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sin.” When we participate in this sacrament, we become united with him and in him. We become that one body, Christ's body in the world.

I'm more and more convinced that it's really important for us to let both of those fundamental beliefs sink in and take hold of us. The first—that we are loved just as we are and that God holds us in that love forever. The second—that, in Christ, we are united to one another. When one member rejoices, all rejoice. When any one suffers, we all suffer. Whatever gifts and resources we have are given by God for the building up of the whole.

And whatever boxes we put ourselves or others in, to make them into the problem or the enemy or the “other”—those boxes exist no more in the love of Christ who embraces all.

All that sounds pleasant when we’re here in worship—beautiful music, everyone on their best behavior--but today’s Scripture reading reminds us that this bubble of love isn’t supposed to evaporate when we go to Coffee Hour or when we leave and go our separate ways. That unity in love is to become what defines us, what sets us apart from the ways of the world.

Now, you know, when things get crazy and nasty out there, people may feel free to say all kinds of things to and about one another...or quickly lose track of the fact that another’s welfare is as important as our own. I don’t know about you, but I know that sometimes it’s really hard to keep our hearts open. To always strive to speak the truth in love, as the Scripture says. To consider the needs of another as I would my own. This requires hard work on our part, long after the pleasant vibes of a worship service have faded away.

So the writer of this letter implores us: "...I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

I see this sacrament of Holy Communion as something of a holy convergence, the coming together of God’s powerful grace, working in us to change us from the inside out and bind us together in love, with our most sincere determination to live, starting now, as the new creation in Christ.

Our word “sacrament” comes from the Greek word *mysterion* which means “mystery.” What happens here at this table takes us far beyond our ability to fully articulate and comprehend. It’s a mystery! The sacrament is both aspirational and invitational. What God is doing here, in us and for us, carries us far beyond our narrow human-made boxes and preconceptions. God is creating a new future here for each of us and for our world and God invites us to become part of it.

The church becomes, as one writer put it, a “hope factory” in our community and in the larger world. And aren’t we needed now more than ever, to be that community of love, respect, compassion, engagement, and joy that offers the world a true alternative?

Let us prepare our hearts and minds to receive the sacrament of our Lord, that Christ may ever live in us and we in him, and that this very day, God’s grace will touch our hearts and change our lives

Amen.

Notes:

William Brosend. *Preaching Truth in the Age of Alternative Facts*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018.

Karen P. Oliveto. *Together at the Table: Diversity without Division in The United Methodist Church*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018.

*This Holy Mystery: A United Methodist Understanding of Holy Communion*. UMC Discipleship Ministries, 2004.