

Wait! ...The Church Can *Change*??

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
May 7, 2017

- Acts 2:42-47 The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers (v.42).
- 1 Corinthians 11:23-32 So then, everyone should examine himself first, and then eat the bread and drink from the cup (v. 28).
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: The church has always been about personal and institutional change.

As we prepare to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper this morning, I hope each of you remembered to bring your "communion token" with you ...! No, don't worry. It's been so long since the Presbyterian Church used communion tokens that most of you have never heard of them. But 150 years ago in many churches you wouldn't have been permitted to receive communion if you didn't have a token. Church records from the Presbyterian Church in Booth Bay, Maine in 1767 offer a description of how the minister prepared his congregation to be in a proper spiritual frame of mind and heart in order to be worthy of receiving the Lord' Supper.

Preparation began with a sermon the day before, followed by an address by the minister describing the qualifications of any believer who would desire to receive the bread and cup. Then he "poured out on the table a great number of small square pieces of lead on which the initials of his name were stamped in capitals...."¹ The pastor or elders would deliver a communion token into the hands of the Communicants [those desiring to have communion] either right then or at some other point prior to the administration of the Lord's Supper the next day. My eighth great-grandfather the Rev. Robert McMordie of Gettysburg probably carried out that same practice.

Communion tokens were intended to guard against persons receiving communion who were not approved, perhaps because they were not members of the church or perhaps because of their well-known unseemly behavior or character. According to the account from 1767, communicants would actually sit around the communion table, and you would not be permitted to sit without first giving your communion token to the minister or elder stationed for that purpose.

Another old account, this one from 1781, noted that at that time there were only four Presbyterian pastors serving west of the Allegheny Mountains. The Rev. Joseph Smith wrote that for many years it was customary for the Lord's Supper to be administered not more than twice a year, such was the demand for ministers to make the rounds to various faith communities springing up in the wild region southeast of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He noted that when a minister would come to your area, people would be "assembling from all directions – many on horseback, more on foot... Some are seen on the ground, or [sitting] on the logs, putting on their stockings and shoes – for they have walked [as many as ten or fifteen] miles barefoot, carrying these articles wrapped in their kerchiefs, in their hands...."²

The use of communion tokens was an attempt to do what they called "fencing the table," that is, indicating who was and who wasn't welcomed at this administration of the Lord's Supper. Presbyterians brought the practice to United States from the custom in Scotland. And in Scotland it may have been a variation on a practice from the earliest days of the Christian church. In the first three centuries of Christianity, even before there were church buildings, Christians worshiped in private homes or in houses adapted to host worship gatherings. In those days it was the practice that anyone – members of that faith community, those being initiated and instructed in the faith, or visitors and guests could attend the first

¹ Armstrong, Maurice W., *et. al.* The Presbyterian Enterprise: Sources of American Presbyterian History. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961, 77.

² Armstrong, Maurice W., *et. al.* The Presbyterian Enterprise: Sources of American Presbyterian History. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961, 98.

part of the service, singing songs of praise, hearing the reading of scripture, engaging in prayer. But when it came time to celebrate the Lord's Supper, the members of the community got up and went to another room. And if you weren't a member? If you were still being instructed in the faith (which was a process that took at least three years)...? You were left behind. Left out. Excluded.

But the church changed. Today as we prepare to accept the gift of the sacrament of the communion, we are still urged to examine our heart and mind and spirit to confess how we've fallen short of Christ's example. But we don't have to measure up to a standard of perfection. We don't have to cover up the realities of our human nature. We don't have to prove our worthiness, because it's the mercy of God that deems us worthy to be called children of God and sister or brother of Jesus the Son.

The church changes. Think back to the very first members of the church: the apostles. When they sensed a call to follow Jesus they changed: they walked away from their lives as commercial fishermen and tax collectors and perhaps other occupations. They certainly changed.

I hope we're here because we, too, want to change. I daresay none of us lives a life that is completely above reproach. We get cranky. At times we may notice that we display a touch of selfishness that we regret. We may overindulge in something or another, and try to convince ourselves that we're entitled, deserving. We may take much pride in our ability and consequently fail to appreciate or even give credit to God the Creator and Sustainer of our lives. We don't affiliate with this church in order to beat ourselves down as unworthy. But one of the changes we can seek by engaging with this church is to strive to become more Christ-like. Not to become God. But to become more obedient, more trusting, more compassionate, more devout, more faith-inspired, more patient, more understanding, more respectful, more appreciative, more generous, more willing to serve. We pray for that kind of change from our engagement with this faith community.

For that matter, faith communities like this church need to remain open to changing. Christianity is constantly challenged with how to share the gospel with rising generations even as we seek to minister to current generations. That's a tall task. Big questions need to be wrestled with. How do we preserve the truth of the gospel but engage people in relevant, meaningful ways so they respond to the gospel through thankfulness to God and service to others? Other ministers and I are already contemplating those kinds of big questions. Such questions are scary. We don't know what's coming next, but we know that the world we live in is changing very quickly.

- Think how the banking industry has changed in the last twenty to thirty years? With the proliferation of automatic teller machines, when's the last time you got cash by writing a check to your bank? Or ask anyone under age thirty when was the last time they even wrote a check?
- Think how the airline industry has changed. Stewardesses used to have to be nurses. There was a time that stewardesses were hired and fired for their physical appearance. Now flight attendants can be of any gender and age. The first time I flew at age 14 I was wearing a sport coat and tie. Now you can board a plane wearing your pajamas.
- Think how health care is changing. Non-invasive medical procedures that were the fantasy of the TV show "Star Trek" are becoming reality. People live long lives "managing" diseases that used to be deadly. I heard this week about the increasing pace of the growth of medical knowledge. In 1915 it would take about 150 years for the amount of medical knowledge to double. Now the amount of medical knowledge doubles every 73 days.³

In order to adapt to changing times and changing needs, the church will need to adapt and change, too. What those adaptations will be, ministers and church boards are trying to discern. Today, though, we're taking a very small step in that direction. Please find the beige-colored insert in today's bulletin that's titled "Activities Survey." It's quite simple. There are activities our church does every year in order to enjoy and build our spirit of fellowship and friendship. Should we keep doing them? Should we discontinue some? Are there other activities we should consider trying?

As we allow a minute for you to complete the survey, think of this as your prayer asking God how we can be drawn together in fellowship and how we can reach out to our community in friendship. After the service you can give your survey to ushers at the doors.

[sermons: se20170507; © 2017 Jon M. Fancher]

³ Reported at a meeting of the Cleveland Clinic and Regional Hospitals Combined Boards of Trustees 5/1/2017.