

The Table in Front of You

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
October 4, 2020—World Communion Sunday

- Matthew 26:26-29 (Good News Translation) ²⁶ While they were eating, Jesus took a piece of bread, gave a prayer of thanks, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. "Take and eat it," he said; "this is my body." ²⁷ Then he took a cup, gave thanks to God, and gave it to them. "Drink it, all of you," he said; ²⁸ "this is my blood, which seals God's covenant, my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you, I will never again drink this wine until the day I drink the new wine with you in my Father's Kingdom."
- Galatians 3:26-29 (Good News Translation) ²⁶ It is through faith that all of you are God's children in union with Christ Jesus. ²⁷ You were baptized into union with Christ, and now you are clothed, so to speak, with the life of Christ himself. ²⁸ So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are the descendants of Abraham and will receive what God has promised.

The Lord's Supper is also known, of course, as communion or sometimes Holy Communion. Sometimes it's called the Eucharist based on the Greek word for thanksgiving. The Lord's Supper is a distinctive religious rite that's practiced wherever God is known and worshiped through Jesus Christ. Communion is a world-wide practice that we would recognize wherever we might be. True, there would be differences from what we're accustomed to as communion is practiced in our society.

- We might expect the celebration of the Lord's Supper to be a small part of an hour-long worship service, but other traditions might have communion services that last two or three hours or longer.
- Communion might be celebrated with a come-as-you-are informality in a church in this country. But elsewhere in the world the expectation might be that worshipers are attired in specific kinds of clothing.
- We might expect to join in communion with our families, but in some cultures men and women are seated by gender in different areas of the worship space.

Even the elements that people eat and drink during the Lord's Supper might be different depending on where you are:

- in China, the bread for communion might be made from rice flour, and in Morocco it might be from corn meal.
- In the Caribbean they might use banana bread for communion, in the country of Chile the bread might be made from squash, and in eastern Europe bread may be made from potatoes.
- Where grape juice might be used for a communion service in Alabama or a cherry wine might be used in a service in Michigan, it could be a plum wine in Japan or an apricot wine in Bulgaria.

But what is common is the action that occurs, and what the action symbolizes. As we hear each time we come to the Lord's table, Jesus took bread, blessed God, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples.

Every year this Lord's Day on the first Sunday of October is designated as "World Communion Sunday." How did that happen? It happened because of a Presbyterian minister, and it happened not all that far from Rocky River, Ohio. The Rev. Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr was pastor at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. In 1930 he was serving as the Moderator of the General Assembly of the whole Presbyterian denomination. Dr. Kerr got the idea of emphasizing the world-wide nature of the Lord's Supper as a way of drawing the world together – starting with the churches of Pittsburgh.¹ Shadyside Presbyterian sponsored the first observance of World-Wide Communion in 1933, but it didn't really take off until the 1940s during and after the Second World War when churches saw an urgent need to try to "hold the world together."

I'm certain that World Communion Sunday was observed in all the churches of my childhood. But the first time I was aware of it was my freshman year in college. During the World Communion worship service at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Wooster, Ohio, worshipers were invited to share what part of the world they were remembering that morning.

As you may know, when I started college I had just returned to the United States from four years living in Indonesia, literally on the other side of the world. My father taught at a Christian seminary in Jakarta, and my family was still living there. On that World Communion Sunday early in my college years I was aware that my family undoubtedly had celebrated communion twelve hours earlier, and that my inclusion in the Lord's Supper in Wooster, Ohio somehow united me with my family that day.

That's the usual focus of a World Communion Sunday: we're encouraged to think about Christians in other parts of the world.

- Perhaps we recall the congregation worshipping in that charming Alpine chapel we visited on our ski vacation to Switzerland a few years back;
- On World Communion Sunday we're encouraged to hold in prayer the Christians who hosted us when we participated in that hurricane clean-up some years ago in New Orleans or Homeland or Port-au-Prince.
- On World Communion Sunday our hearts embrace the Christians we met on the business trip to South Korea – and if they were Christian in South Korea, they were most likely Presbyterian because of our mission work there in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Of course, if you don't have much or any experience traveling abroad, it might be a little harder to feel an emotional connection with Christians in other lands; it might feel artificial, trying to imagine people you've never met.

So for this World Communion Sunday I have a suggestion. By all means, picture in your head and embrace in your heart the global Christians you're acquainted with. But this year, let's also remember the Christians who are right here with you: like you they are engaged with this congregation while physically separated. They're hearing my voice just as you are right now. They are present at the Lord's table just as you are. They're sitting in their living room or den. They're in their hospital bed or sitting at their kitchen table. Their Wifi connection is enabling them to worship out on the balcony or

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/special-days-and-emphases/world-communion-sunday/>
accessed 9/19/2020

patio or deck. Like you, they're on the other side of this screen from me. It's almost as if they are sitting there with you, side-by-side at the Lord's table, awaiting the invitation to taste and see that the Lord is good.

The apostle Paul envisioned us being drawn together by Jesus Christ despite whatever culture we grew up in, the society we live in, where or even when we are participating in this broadcast. In that familiar verse from his letter to the Galatians, Paul assured us, "So there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women; you are all one in union with Christ Jesus."²

This year our remembrance of World Communion Sunday is a little different. Yes, it's gratifying to remember that because of Jesus we are like sisters and brothers to believers in Azerbaijan and the Aleutian Islands, in America's Midwest and in Africa's Mozambique – we are sisters and brothers in Christ with believers all around the world.

And yet this year, let's also picture our sisters and brothers in Christ who aren't on another continent but rather simply on another block in our development; our sisters and brothers in Christ are in the community next door; our sisters and brothers in Christ are simply on the other side of the "window" before us. Friends, we are in union with each other in spirit and in friendship because we are in union with Christ Jesus.

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² Galatians 3:28 Good News Translation