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First Christian Church
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World Communion Sunday
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“In the Presence Of....”

(Psalm 23 King James Version) The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

(1 Corinthians 10:16-17 NRSV) The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

What is the most memorable communion service you have ever been a part of? As I think about that question, my mind goes to both the silly and the somber. When I was about 16 years old, I went to summer church camp. It was my first year of high school camp, if I remember correctly. As is still typical of our Disciples church camp experiences all over the country, we were divided into small groups which met together during the week for study, prayer, and fun. But each evening, we also re-gathered as a whole camp and had worship together. Over the course of the week, each small group was responsible for planning one of those worship services. Communion was always a part of those worship services, not just at the close of camp at the end of the week, but every evening. Well, the night it was our group's turn, I and one of the other guys in our small group got delegated to prepare the communion elements, the bread and the juice. Now, this was back in the day when we hadn't heard of intinction yet, where pieces of bread were torn from a common loaf and then dipped in a common cup and eaten. Instead, communion at camp was pretty much the form that we do it here every Sunday – a tray with the little tiny crackers and a tray, much-battered from its use over the years

at camp, of small communion cups. In fact, if I may digress a moment, every regional church campground I've ever been to over the years still has, somewhere in a closet, a set of communion trays and cups, usually passed along by one of the churches at some point in the past, but which now go unused as intinction is the almost universal practice at the camps I've been at in the last 20 years. So, anyway, it was my friend's and my job to prepare the elements for that night at camp so long ago, filling the little cups, making sure there were enough cups for the five or six dozen of us at camp. So we went to the camp kitchen that afternoon to do this – but we couldn't find the grape juice. But then one of us had the really bright idea of using grape jello instead. We reasoned – if you can call it reasoning – that if we cut the recipe with enough water it would be fine. So that's what we did, and we left the tray in the walk-in refrigerator. Well, come closing worship time that evening, we brought forward the tray with the cups and the crackers on them. But we had been wrong about the ability of jello to stay liquid, even when cut with lots and lots of water. And so in what was supposed to be the dignified, closing moments of worship where each camper received the communion with reverence and thoughtfulness, instead we had a situation where what was in the cups wouldn't come out. Turn them upside down, and the grape goo wouldn't come out. People were having to tongue the cups in order to get at what was supposed to have been juice. I think the camp director *eventually* forgave us for our cooking stupidity. *"Thou preparest a Table before me, even in the presence of youthful silliness – and thou art with me."*

But there was another communion many years later that was oh-so-different in tone. It was one of those services where you would have given anything if there had been no need for that service. It was the funeral service for a pastor in northern California who had died unexpectedly – and died from appendicitis, of all things.

People are not “supposed” to die from appendicitis anymore. I was his Regional Minister, he affectionately referred to me as his bishop. And before he died, he asked if I would do the sermon at his funeral. It was one of the hardest sermons I have ever had to preach. I hope people found it helpful, or at least as helpful as is possible under such circumstances. But what I remember more about the service is that it closed with communion. A communion service that gave life, and strength, and hope amidst the grief. A communion service where the bread and the cup became those oh-so-tangible reminders that even in the midst of death God is in the most ordinary of things seeking to comfort, seeking to bring good. *“Thou preparest a Table before me in the presence of even death – and thou art with me.”*

Or I remember another communion service, this time at a hotel. It was 20 plus years ago now and I was on the staff of our Disciples seminary in Indianapolis. One of my jobs was to plan programs using a grant the seminary had been given. It was kind of fun to have a job where you got to spend other people’s money. One of the programs I planned was a weekend to bring together some of the leaders from across the theological spectrum in the Disciples denomination. And, to my surprise, most of those invited came. And so around the discussion table we had what you would call extreme liberals and extreme conservatives. We had folks who would label themselves as fundamentalists and we had folks who were as far from that label as could be. We talked and talked all weekend. And, the fact is, we didn’t make much progress in changing each other’s minds and there was more than a little tension in the room as is to be expected when folks with such differing ideas argue over things about which they care passionately. And when the weekend was over, we decided to have communion as part of closing worship. But the hotel had no grape juice, and this was not a group where you would ever want to serve wine. But the hotel did have cranberry juice. And

so that is what I prepared. And one of participants said to me: “How fitting for this weekend to use something that comes from a bog.” *“Thou preparest a Table before me in the presence of deep, deep disagreement – and Thou are with us.”*

Or maybe it’s not a communion service that you have been a part of yourself, but one about which you have been told or have read. Ten hours ago, in parts of southern Africa, worship was held in various villages as the sun rose. And some of those folks are the poorest of the world’s poor. Picture in your minds a deeply dark, black woman in sub-Saharan Africa dressed in a hand-made, tattered gown, a woman who didn’t have any breakfast so that she might have enough to feed her children, a woman who walked ten miles to a place that we might hardly call a church.¹ And think about this: to arrive at that church for sunrise worship, she and thousands like her had to walk most of the night to get there. Some of them walked hours in the absolute dark, holding one another’s hands because in parts of southern Africa the local ruler doesn’t approve of Christianity and has tried to stamp it out and so has forbidden people to be out after dark. But instead of obeying, thousands of these men and women walk silently all night with no light whatsoever except what the moon and stars provide because to show a flashlight could give away their presence. And so we can picture that woman – and thousands of other women and men like her – “kneeling, holding out her hands to receive from the same body we receive, trembling at the promise of love and transformation contained in those simple grains and the juice of the fruit of God’s creation.”² *“Thou preparest a Table before me in the presence of those who would seek to keep me from Your love – and Thou art with me.”*

¹<http://gracesermons.blogspot.com/2006/10/will-rice-sermon-30-one-body.html>

²ibid.

It wasn't that many years ago that being a Christian was a crime in the former Soviet Union and in China. Churches were closed, priests threatened and even exiled to the gulags or to "re-education camps." Folks who went to church found their job prospects plummet to nothing and even their families would be persecuted and hounded. And while things are better in both the former Soviet Union and in China, there is still not the same freedom to worship that we so often so unreflectively take for granted in our lives, and one is supposed to still only go to a government-approved church, one that is officially "registered" as the Chinese government puts it. And so we can close our eyes and picture a tiny gathering of believers in China, who gathered eighteen hours ago near the beginning of this World Communion Sunday, and who actually risked arrest by gathering in an "unregistered" group. We can picture a Chinese man sitting in a small room, holding out his hands to receive the same body we receive, trembling at the power of the sacrament and perhaps the fear of being discovered.³ *"Thou preparest a Table before me in the presence of fear – and Thou art with me."*

My friends, we have already been touched by half the planet this morning. The wheat for your toast may well have been grown in Kansas and your bread may have been baked in Oregon. And while your coffee may have come from Hawaii, it also may well have come from Kenya or Sumatra. This time of year, your orange juice was likely from Florida or California or Argentina. Then you went and got dressed in clothes where the cloth was perhaps made in Indonesia and your shoes started their lives in Thailand. You got into your car – which, no matter the make and model, was likely to have been put together in someplace like Brazil or Mexico or Japan or Ohio with components from Ireland, Czechoslovakia or Arkansas, and the gas to run it was pumped in Saudi Arabia or Kuwait or Texas. Throw in the fact that you are sharing air and water with five and

³ibid. And cf. <http://www.wpc.org/sermons/2006/w061001arl.htm>

half billion other people across the planet and I'd say that all of us are already in communion with the whole world every day.⁴

But that's not quite right, is it? For there is a difference between simply being inter-related cogs in a worldwide economic machine, and truly being in "**communion**" with all those ones around the world. And it's a matter of looking at them and yourself differently, isn't it? Paul put it this way: "*Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*" We share one bread. That's the shift we need to make – seeing these loaves on these table before us, seeing these lives gathered in this room, as part of the loaves and lives of all of God's children. How do we do that? Well, it doesn't happen automatically. And the world certainly doesn't encourage us in this way of thinking; rather we are urged to see the world as a dog-eat-dog place of competition, a zero-sum game where if someone else wins then we lose. But God has a different idea. God has the dream that indeed all creation can move toward justice and peace, towards hope and wholeness, toward beauty and bounty. But, on this World Communion Sunday, where God has spread this lavish Table before us in the presence of billions of our brothers and sisters around the world, we are challenged to help God with that dream.

How do we do so? How do we see this bread which we break as representing the fact that we are indeed one Body with all those other Christians? Well, the founder of the Methodist Church, John Wesley, once said this: "*Get on your knees because much depends upon God. [But] Get on your feet because much depends on you.*"⁵ *Much depends on you.* As you receive communion today, in the presence of this bounty of bread set before us, I want to invite you to be in prayer for one specific

⁴This paragraph adapted from http://bloomingcactus.typepad.com/bloomingcactus/2005/11/matthew_213346_.html

⁵Quoted in – and much of this paragraph adapted from – ibid.

concern you have for the world. Pray fervently for those who are suffering and crushed by exploitation. And pray for God's guidance about something you can do. I challenge everyone to have one major concern about the world. Read about it, become an expert in one thing, let it become a passion for you, find some way to make a connection, to somehow join God's dream and God's work on that issue. And indeed we shall know that the bread which we break is at tiny taste of the Kingdom to come, a sharing in the Body of Christ and a sign that we are indeed one body – *for God preparest a Table before us*, a Table as wide as the world. For that good news, for that nourishment, for that hope, we say: Thanks be to God. Amen.