

REFLECTION FOR WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, October 6, 2019)

Today is World Communion Sunday, one of the most honoured of Sundays within the Christian religion. On this day we join with Christians worldwide to celebrate unity and ecumenical cooperation through the breaking of bread and by remembering Jesus' ministry of justice and peace. Imagine how remarkable this day is: Christians taking the opportunity to be in community eating a variety of breads and using various forms of liturgy as they gather in homes, villages, churches, huts and out of doors, to celebrate the continued hope of Christian unity. In some countries Christians are persecuted but they will courageously meet secretly perhaps in cave churches, or silently in homes.

World Communion Sunday was an initiative of the 1930's liberal protestant movement. In 1933 Presbyterian minister Dr. Hugo Kerr celebrated the first Worldwide Communion Sunday with his congregation, Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The service was held in response to the Great Depression and the growth of Nazism and Fascism in Europe. It was an attempt by the global Christian church to hold the world together.

Years later, Dr. Kerr, who became Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, re-introduced this world communion practice as a meal of unity in faith to counteract growing fear and pessimism. World Communion Sunday was endorsed by the National Council of Churches in 1940 during WWII. Since then Christians around the world have joined together to celebrate communion on the first Sunday of October in a universal spirit with one central hope that justice and compassion may transform our world. This sacrament calls us to work for fairness and equality in a world spiritually disconnected, economically destabilized and environmentally compromised.

World Communion Sunday is an opportunity for the wider Christian Church to move beyond historical and theological differences and worship

together in genuine unity in Christ, even while we recognize and confess that separating walls remain high, and that a truly ecumenical unity remains a dream.

As we all know this world in which we live is a shattered and broken one and is suffering profoundly. Daily we are confronted with news and images of terrorism, oppression, natural and human made disasters, and conflicts of every kind. National leaders seem more concerned with pointing fingers or gaining power over than they are with working together for the good of the world's people, prejudice runs rampant, suicide is on the rise, and the list goes on. Brokenness and fear touch many hearts of this one world family; consequently, numerous people are living in quiet despair, increasing fear and isolation, and trying to find ways of distracting themselves from the hard realities of life.

Globally, we are not only in a political, economic and psychological crisis, but also a spiritual crisis. There are divisions within religions and between religions with some of the more fundamentalist groups spreading their terror through violence and hatred. In this global environment what is the significance of World Communion Sunday?

We are living in a time when we can travel anywhere in the world, we have the capability to be in touch digitally with people in some of the remotest areas of the world, even in space, and free trade has opened the world to sharing resources between countries. Sadly, the more connected we are the more disconnected we become, the more connected we are the more fearful and distrustful we become of those different from us, those close to us and those far away. In our unease and mistrust we tend to move toward an increasingly individualistic existence, especially in the West.

In his book *Jesus Today*, South African Priest Alan Nolan writes, "As humans we are one flesh belonging to one human family. As living beings, we belong to the closely-knit family of living organisms that have evolved one from another over the last four billion years. So also, as individual entities we can trace our ancestry back to that first burst of energy. We are one with the stars and everything else," one world family.

While we are a one world family many theologians, economists, psychologists, and sociologists warn us about the crisis of individualism. Father Nolan defines individualism in this way: "Each person is a self-

made, self-sufficient, autonomous individual who stands by himself or herself, not needing anyone else and not beholden to anyone for anything. Freedom and happiness are equated with independence and self-sufficiency.” Individualism declares that “I am separate from others and from the rest of the enveloping world, isolated and alone, forging my own path in a hostile competitive world.”

Yet, no matter how firmly we believe that we are separate, independent, and autonomous, reality is that every living being is part of an immense and intricate whole. For many years cosmologists and physicists have shared their revelations about the interwoven evolutionary processes of the universe and as they do so we are more aware of being but a tiny part of a holistic system, a single community of life. Long before cosmologists’ research Paul was teaching that every thought and action of ours affects others and the community. More than ever we are aware that when something goes wrong in one part of the world it does in fact impact the entire world. With this knowledge in hand it is essential that we recognize our interconnection so we can collectively address the world and creation’s suffering and pain.

We need each other. Humans are fundamentally relational beings. We cannot make it alone. The spirit of God flows between us and every other living entity in the world and this can never be broken even if this connection is constantly challenged and tested. The transformation of this one world family toward justice, peace and healing depends on our loving human connections that are our most renewable resource of hope and courage.

Today we see the numerous endeavors of people connecting in their desire to address global issues. Millions of young people standing together to urge governments to take climate change seriously. Millions of people in a variety of countries connecting to rally against corrupt and power-thirsty political leadership. People connecting with one another to fight for human rights, to help refugees, and to address the issues of poverty and disease.

In Calgary we have people of different cultures and faiths, businesses and organizations connecting as the Calgary Alliance for the Common Good to address issues around Reconciliation, seniors, addictions and mental healthy, the environment and social isolation.

Perhaps people are finally understanding that we are all part of the ever-evolving processes of life that connect us to everyone and to everything and awakening to hope, knowing that collectively we have greater capacity to survive in a falling apart world.

Jesus and Paul lived in a time of great social, political and religious upheaval. Deep divisions existed between people and religions. When Jesus broke bread and drank wine with his followers and friends it was as if the walls of division were dissolved around them. This act of Jesus breaking bread became a powerful symbol of hope. Paul writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

In her book *The Spirituality of Bread* Donna Sinclair writes, “In a nation where many, including Jesus, were often hungry...nothing could give Jesus’ friends more hope than bread, which depends on grain that dies in the fields but comes back again as goodness. Each time we share communion we are reminded of how Jesus brought together people of different faiths, gender, and status and how in the sharing of bread he offered hope and a vision of a new kingdom of unity and peace in which the “lion would lie down with the lamb.”

Being in community, sharing a meal, takes us out of our separateness and connects us with others, friends, strangers, and enemies. We come to this table for our own spiritual renewal, but when we come, we are reminded that the One who first laid out this feast spent his time with broken people. So, while we bring our own brokenness to this table, we recognize our responsibility for reaching out to others in their brokenness with the same hand of love that Jesus extended to others.

Today as Christians worldwide meet to break bread and share the cup, there is unity at the table. Each person approaches the meal differently, with different cares, concerns, hopes and dreams. And yet in our differences we are not alone, we are one in the Spirit. Even though we seek different things, we are all seeking. Even though we pray different prayers, we are all praying. Even though we travel different paths, we are all pausing to remember Christ’s ministry of justice and peace. And even though we are totally and completely unique in our journeys, the Holy God of Love meets each one of us exactly where we are, reconnecting as brothers and sisters in our renewal.

In Sins of the Spirit, Blessings of the Flesh, Matthew Fox writes, “Interconnectivity is the heart of the Eucharistic experience: God and humanity coming together, God and flesh, the flesh of wheat, wine, sunshine, soil, water, human ingenuity, stars, supernovas, galaxies, storms, fireballs.”

We come to the table, one with the universe, and one with each other. We come with all our Christian brothers and sisters worldwide who are struggling, who are celebrating oneness in the body of Christ, and who want peace and justice for the world. We come with our family and friends in this place and with our brothers and sisters worldwide – not in front of them, not behind them, not above them or below them ... but beside them, hand in hand. All are welcome. Amen.