

October 1, 2017

“What Does Communion Mean?”
Philippians 2:1-11, Matthew 21:23-32

Today is World Communion Sunday. World Communion Sunday was started in 1940 as a Presbyterian-led initiative of the Federal Council of Churches, which is now called the National Council of Churches. The idea was to have - on the same day—to have an ecumenical celebration of Communion by Protestants in the United States. At that time, U.S. Protestant denominations celebrated Communion infrequently (quarterly at most), and rarely on the same schedule.

The day promoted the idea of oneness in Christ not only within the United States but across the missionary networks outside the States. It was designed to create a sense of worldwide Communion - connectedness -- on that day. I remember celebrating World Communion Sunday when I was growing up in Japan.

It's the day when we remember that Christians all over the world belong to one Church whose head is Jesus Christ even though we may belong to different denominations, may have different theologies or different church structures.

When we receive bread and share a cup in communion, we remind ourselves that even though we may have different opinions, ideas and approaches for doing things within a congregation, we are all parts of Christ's body and that our head is Jesus Christ. When we forget that Christ is our head, we easily stumble and fall apart as the church.

Preparing for yesterday's Harvest Fair, a fair committee member and I were looking at the computer screen that listed various ministries and outreach programs of this congregation. After trying out different fonts, colors and styles, we came up with this.

With worship as its center, we have various outreach ministries. We may replace the word worship with the church or the body of Christ, since all the ministries are the church's ministries. Or we may replace the word worship with Christ because all are Christ's ministries. Christ is the reason why we exist as the church and the reason for all the ministries we do in the name of the church.

Communion is, in a way, God's call for us to come to the core of being the church together. We are the body of Christ and we belong to Christ, the head. That's where we find our oneness, even though we may speak different languages, may have a different color of skin, may hold different theologies and may have or like a different style of worship. In worshipping Christ we overcome barriers that separate us from one another.

In today's First Lesson, the Apostle Paul exhorts Christians in Philippi to unity by becoming humble as Jesus humbled himself to become human and was obedient to God even to the point of death on the cross.

In today's Gospel lesson, the religious leaders at that time were not united with Jesus because their hearts and minds were on a different path from Christ's.

Chief Priests and elders had been very annoyed by Jesus because he was drawing more crowds than they were and because his teaching was very different from theirs. Jesus' teaching shed light on God's truth and love. Theirs was to be righteous by observing the law. So they asked Jesus a question: "Who gave you the authority to do what you are doing? What authority do you have to do these things?"

In other words, they are saying, "You don't belong to us. We are the religious authority. What authority do you have?"

Instead of answering their question, Jesus asked a question of them; "Where did John get his authority to baptize? Did he get it from heaven or from humans? If you give me your answer to my question, I'll give you my answer to your question."

Since the mind and heart of those religious leaders were not on God but on themselves - on keeping their status quo, they started to argue among themselves.

"If we say 'from heaven,' this guy, Jesus, would say, 'why didn't you believe him?' But if we say 'from human,' the crowd would be upset because they believed that he was a prophet, a man of God."

So they couldn't give their answer to Jesus. Their heart and mind was not on God but on their selfish motive - to keep their comfortable status in society. So they said to Jesus, "we don't know."

It's not that they didn't know. They didn't want to know. They didn't want their place in society to be challenged.

Jesus said, "Then I won't tell you with what kind of authority I have to do what I am doing."

The chief priests and elders were not one with Jesus because their hearts and minds were not aligned with Jesus'. Jesus' heart and mind was on God; theirs were not.

When our minds and hearts are on Jesus, we have one purpose; and we will have oneness in Christ. That's what communion calls for. That's what World Communion Sunday reminds us of - oneness in Christ regardless of differences, one body of Christ.

The Ecumenical Thanksgiving Service we hold the Sunday before Thanksgiving Day is a celebration of oneness in Christ regardless of the different denominations to which we belong.

Ecumenical “Meet and Eat” is a celebration of Christian fellowship among those who attend different churches in the local area. It’s a celebration of oneness in Christ. We all belong to the one Church.

It is very appropriate, therefore, on this World Communion Sunday to extend our hearts and minds to the Christians across the globe and to take a special offering benefitting ten students from remote areas of the Philippines - allowing them to finish the last two years of their high school education. This outreach mission is through Rev. Grace Choi, our missionary to the Philippines.

As we break bread and receive the cup together this morning, let us remember that Christ is the head and center of the church; any church. Christ is the one that unites us in spite of all our differences. If we are willing to follow his footsteps, we will be one in Christ.

Let us receive Christ and celebrate oneness in Him on this World Communion Sunday.