

October 3, 2021

“World Communion Sunday”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

John 21:1-17

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Today is World Communion Sunday, which is always the first Sunday of October. And what exactly is that? Well, it's a time when Christians all around the world think about and celebrate communion in the context of the global community of faith. Often we think too narrowly – that our faith is somehow centered in and through just our own church, John Wesley. But consider that today millions of Christians from every culture around the world will break bread and pour the cup to remember and affirm Jesus Christ and his great sacrifice on the cross for all of us. That's powerful! Whether shared outside in the backyard, in a grand cathedral, a mud hut, a meetinghouse, or in a storefront, Christians celebrate the communion liturgy and come to the table of the Lord where all are welcomed as one body, one with each other, and one with Christ. And in this church, all means all! No matter your sexual orientation, your color, or your socio-economic status, whatever! All means all.

So let's talk more about communion. What makes it special? What makes it sacred? Well, the bottom line is that communion is all about God's grace toward us. So what is grace? Well, grace is the love of God shown to the unlovely. Grace is the peace of God given to the restless. Grace is the unmerited favor and mercy of God given to the undeserving. Let me repeat that. Grace is the love of God shown to the unlovely. Grace is the peace of God given to the restless. Grace is the unmerited favor and mercy of God given to the undeserving. And that's why I chose today's Scripture about a special communion breakfast and the disciple Peter, where this grace is shown. Because it's one I think we can all relate to as we prepared to share in this sacred meal today.

But first, let's review some background, and go to the night before Jesus was crucified. Now Peter was the boldest and most outspoken disciple, but that night, out of fear of what others would say, worry over what might happen to him, and lack of trust, he did what he vowed he would never do, and he denied Jesus three times. After his third denial, a rooster crowed just as Jesus predicted. When Peter heard its call, the Bible says that he ‘broke down and cried bitterly,’ instantly convicted of his sin and guilt which brought him to tears. And just imagine how Jesus must have felt when his disciple and friend for years denied and rejected him. Now, fast forward to after Jesus' crucifixion and death. Women go to the tomb to prepare his body but they find the tomb empty. An angel is sitting there, and listen to what he tells them: “Do not be afraid. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not

here. But go, tell his disciples **and Peter,** (did you get that - and Peter?) that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” The angel instructs the women to go tell the disciples, and Peter, that he has been raised from the dead. The Bible doesn't say why Peter is specifically named, but I'm sure it's because Jesus wanted to make it a point that Peter knew he was forgiven of his betrayal, his unfaithfulness, his sin, and was still one of his beloved friends. You see, even though Peter forsake Christ, Christ did not forsake Peter. This is a powerful example of the depth of love and forgiveness and grace of God. So now that you know the details leading up to today's scripture, let's listen to an amusing, but emotional, take by the Skit Guys as to what happened on the lakeshore that morning between Peter and Jesus. <http://www.sermonspice.com/product/39026/grace>

“What I did on the cross was meant to take what is unforgivable and make it forgivable. It's not about you, it's always about me. That's grace, my friends.” Amazing grace. So let's look at how grace plays a role in today's scripture that so wonderfully describes a communion event. An event in which Peter, even though he feels so separated from Christ because of his actions, finds that the distance between human weakness and divine love, a space we thought was beyond measurement, is, in fact, closed by God's grace. And haven't we all felt separated from God at some point in our lives? So let's look at today's passage with some insights from spiritual director, John Shea.

First, consider Peter's words at the beginning of this passage. “I am going fishing!” “I am going fishing!” The unhelpful and wrongheaded word here is “I”. “I” is ego centered. It's a word we use when we place all our hopes on our own unaided and often misguided efforts. When we don't trust in God's goodness. When we don't rely on his promise, “I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you a future with hope.” So Peter, feeling that separation from God, goes back to his fishing, and the other disciples join him on his excursion. And, of course, no fish are caught. Then, consider Jesus' words to them from the shoreline, “Children, you have no fish, do you?” Children! This is a poignant reminder of what he came to teach us all. That we are God's children, called to live in an intimate, trusting, dependent relationship with God. A relationship in which no matter what we've done, no matter our mistakes or failures, nothing will stop God from being there for us. Remember – grace is all about God. It's God's gift to us. And when the disciples finally follow Jesus' instructions, they gather in so many fish they are unable to haul in the net. And that's the thing, abundance is a sure sign of the grace of the Lord in our lives. Jesus said, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.”

And yet, Peter is still struggling with his earlier three denials of Christ. When he realizes it's Jesus on the shoreline, he reacts by covering up his nakedness, then hiding himself by jumping into the sea. This is effectively the same thing that Adam and Eve did when they sinned. The Lord God called out to them in the Garden and said, "Where are you?" Adam said, "I heard the sound of you and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself." And isn't it true that we at times felt like we wanted to hide from God. Because when sinners are in the presence of the divine, their alienation from God so engulfs them that they feel naked and ashamed. And the desire is to hide – to further their separation from God. Yes, a sinner's self-judgment can be extremely harsh. To cast oneself into the sea, is to go beyond the mere act – it has connotations of self-destruction as well. It says all is lost, there is no hope.

But with Christ, there is always hope! For there is Jesus inviting them to breakfast – a meal that symbolizes a new day, a new start. He's warming fish and bread, symbols of Jesus' identity as divine love and life for the world. Peter may think his shortcomings have excluded him from God's love, but instead Jesus says to Peter, and the others, "Come and have breakfast." And consider this. Although Jesus invites them to come and eat, it is ultimately Jesus who reaches out to feed them. "Jesus took the bread and gave it to them." You see, Jesus is both the invitation to the meal and the meal itself – the one who initiates and the one who sustains our divine-human connection. And with Jesus, any separation between the two closes. This communion meal brings the disciples into the love, forgiveness and mercy of God. It is a new day, a new start. Talk about grace!

From this point on, even though the conversation is between Jesus and Peter, the story is really for and about us. For there is only one response to Jesus' question. "Do you love me?" "And that is, "Yes, Lord, I do love you!" "Yes, Lord, we do love you!" "Then feed my sheep." Go and love the unlovely. Go and share the peace of God with the restless. Go and show favor and mercy to the undeserving. For you have been shown grace beyond measure. Now go and share that grace with others. Because it is as St. Paul said, "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love (and I might add, grace) of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord." Amen.