**Dinner Reservations** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Matthew 26:26-30 Saint Paul, Minnesota
October 1, 2023

The first Sunday of October is *World Communion Sunday.* Christians around the world remember that we are linked with brothers and sisters of all colors and languages. There is no better time to remind ourselves of this truth than in these days, when so much of the world is divided into a multitude of warring camps.

In fact, World Communion Sunday is one of the best ideas Presbyterians ever had. The idea originated in the 1930s, a time of economic turmoil and fear and the rise of militaristic fascism abroad. Hugh Thomson Kerr, a beloved pastor in the Presbyterian Church, persuaded the denomination to designate one Sunday when American Christians would join brothers and sisters around the world at the Lord’s Table.

The idea caught on. Other denominations followed suit and the Federal Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches) endorsed World Communion Sunday in 1940. But though the day is still noted in some denominational calendars and program materials, it doesn’t seem to be considered as important as it once was.

Of course, every Sunday is in a sense World Communion Sunday insofar as many churches celebrate the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. But we do not welcome one another at the Lord’s Table. In some churches, a place at the table is reserved for members only. Some Lutherans exclude other Lutherans. And, of course, Eucharist is restricted in the Roman Catholic tradition (although individual Catholic clergy do not always adhere to their church’s teaching on this point).[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let’s pause here and see if we can come to a deeper, clearer understanding of what Communion (the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, the Mass) is all about.

You see, the word *“Eucharist”* is how Episcopalians, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, some Lutherans, and some Presbyterians refer to the meal others call the Lord’s Supper or Communion. It is from two Greek roots, *“eu,”* for *“well,”* and *“kharis,”* for *“favor”* or *“grace.”* Thus, Eucharist, that is, *“gratitude,”* means *“well-favored”* or *“good grace.”*

It is the central ritual of Christian community, considered the most sacred moment of Sunday worship. Participants eat bread and drink wine (juice)—in what most call a *“sacrament”—*to reenact the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before he died.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Christians, of course, have differed about the explanation—whether the bread and wine (juice) are changed into Christ’s body and blood, or whether the body and blood of Christ are present *“in, with, and under”* the bread and wine, or whether the meal is a “remembering.” [But in all these understandings,] the human products of bread and wine (juice) become a means of *grace,* earthen vessels whereby the sacred becomes present to us.[[3]](#footnote-3)

But there’s more. Bread is blessed and shared, a reminder that food is a gift from God, the gift that gives life to our bodies; wine (juice) is blessed and shared, a reminder that drink is a gift from God, a gift that gives joy to our souls.

In fact, the Christian celebration echoes those ancient Hebrew festivals *[Passover, Pentecost, Purim]* in which the Jews recognized and received God’s gifts of *abundance* and, with humility, returned *gratefulness.*

In other words, it’s a reminder that *everything* is a gift. *Bread* is a gift; *wine* (juice)is a gift; *life* and *joy* are gifts. No one can ever pay them back. God never withholds. All we can do is *receive*—in awe of such favor and grace—say thank you to the Giver, and then *“pay it forward”* with humble service to others. Eucharist. Gratitude. Thanksgiving.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Which is a perfect segue to exploring how Jesus used eating and meals—gathering diverse people around tables—as a central feature of his strategy for ministry.

For example, Biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan, describes Jesus’ strategy as one of *“free healing and common eating.”* He suggests that one of Jesus’ primary methods for teaching his vision of the Kingdom of God was through what Crossan calls *“open commensality”* – that is, through sharing egalitarian meals with his listeners.

You see, in the first century, the *banquet table* was an apt symbol of society in miniature. First century Jewish society was structured with an unassailable hierarchy, and this hierarchy could be seen during meals when women served men at the table and never vice versa, lower classes and slaves never shared a meal with the powerful, and sinners never ate with the pious—and children were no-where to be found. The banquet table, then, contained all the same *oppressive barriers* as society at large.

Crossan suggests that Jesus symbolized his message of radical egalitarianism through eating with slave and free, male, and female, sinner and pious, sick, and healthy. He brought every class of person to his table. Crossan states: *“…healing and eating were calculated to force individuals into unmediated physical and spiritual contact with God and…one another.”[[5]](#footnote-5)*

Think of it this way:

In the 1930s, a remarkable woman took the name of the ancient ascetic Mary of Egypt, who had turned from prostitution to the life of a desert hermit. On the rue de Lourmel in Paris, Mother Maria set up a house meant to be a center of service to those in need around her. That house—and others that she helped found—became centers of resistance to the Nazis during World War II, while Mother Maria and her companions smuggled Jewish refugees out of the city. Eventually, Mother Maria was arrested by the Gestapo and died in a gas chamber.

It might come as a surprise that one of the legacies of Mother Maria’s work is found in Kansas City, Missouri. A Serbian Orthodox priest was inspired by her example and set up a parish there, dedicated to practicing hospitality in the style of Mother Maria.

David Altschul was a financial services salesman when he felt called to be­come an Orthodox priest. He became Father Alexii and with his wife, Thelma, found an empty four-story commercial building on Troost Avenue, the historic dividing line between the city’s Black and White communities. They transformed the building to host a plethora of services: a pay-as-you-can restaurant, social and mental health services, a foster grandparents program, a leadership development program, and many other neighborhood-oriented services.

For Mother Maria, the work of making meals, housing homeless people, and creating a sense of welcome and belonging was closely connected to the liturgy, which was celebrated daily in a small chapel in the house. She called the ser­vice “liturgy after liturgy” and connected the bread and soup served at the ordinary table in the house with the bread and wine of the Eucharist. That further liturgy involved scavenging food at the market, preparing meals for all who came to the house, listening to the troubled, and getting them medical attention and a place to sleep. She called those who joined her at that table “living icons,” and she insisted that loving our neighbors is the central work of our faith.

Father Alexii caught this vision and saw how it could be readily applied in his Kansas City neighborhood. Eventually he passed it on to a priest named Justin Mathews, who took over for Father Alexii when he retired.

The services offered at the Troost Avenue building are manifold. Under an umbrella called Reconciliation Services, volunteers there offer over 90,000 hours of service annually. Each year they help clients secure almost 2,000 IDs and birth certificates, assist close to 500 people with medical and dental supplies and services, and offer rent and utilities assistance to at least 800 clients. Social and mental health services are received by 3,000 people.

But the heart of the work is found at Thelma’s Kitchen, where people gather for a meal and conversation. As Mother Maria imagined, this is an extension of the Eucharist. Thelma’s Kitchen serves more than 25,000 meals a year, but it is more than a restaurant. Its tables draw people together; it is a doorway for people to the rest of what Reconciliation Services has to offer. At Thelma’s, each table is a place for guests to gather and, over food, drink, and sharing, to become friends of God and of each other.

One way that Father Justin understands Reconciliation Services’ relationship to the church is as *“para-sacramental.”* John Chrysostom wrote of the continuing of the eucharistic liturgy, begun on the altar in church, to the heart of our neighbor. This connection of liturgy and life, what Mother Maria also called “the liturgy outside the church,” is central to the relationship between the two great commandments. Mother Maria insisted that these are not two separate commandments: faithful practice of each teaches us how to practice the other.

Mother Maria, of course, did not use the term para-sacramental. But when she stressed the relationship between *liturgy and life,* between the *bread and cup* and the *table* set to feed the hungry, she echoed what we read of Jesus’ ministry in the Gospels. She argued extensively in her writings that love of neighbor must include *“concrete, practical acts.”*

This is how Father Alexii and Father Justin have proceeded. Through the work of Reconciliation Services, they seek to see their neighbors as living icons, to extend the love of God through concrete acts, and so to participate in the diakonia to which they are called by Christ.

Friends, perhaps this is a lesson for the local church in the 21st century. At a time when some congregations are dwindling in membership and budgets are shrinking, churches are tempted to retreat into *survival mode.* Resources are reserved for keeping the roof repaired and the heat on. But the example of *Recon­ciliation Services* on Troost Avenue offers a path both *innovative and ancient.*

The liturgy after the liturgy, you see, continues all week. Just as in Mother Maria’s houses and now on Troost Avenue, *every table is a holy table.* The conversation and tears and laughter during a meal are truly a liturgy, *the Eucharist* extended into the lives of all the people of God.[[6]](#footnote-6)

As Jesus said, *“Do this in remembrance of me.”*

1. John Buchanan, *Shared Meal,* The Christian Century, October 2, 2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful,* Harper One, New York, 2018, p. 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity,* Harper, San Francisco, 2003, p. 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful,* Harper One, New York, 2018, p.121 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,”* Harper,San Francisco (Revised), 2009 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Plekon, *Holy Tables, Living Icons,* The Christian Century, October 10, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)