

This past week, the *Washington Post* published an article titled, “Election Day Communion Aims to Heal the Partisan Breach.” According to the article, in the evening of Election Day—now just 3 days from now—more than 400 churches, representing a dozen denominations in 46 states, will set the Communion table as a pastor-priest holds out bread, lifts up a cup, and declares them to be the body and blood of Christ given for you. What began as a local effort on the part of 20 and 30 something year olds has now turned into a national movement.

“Many, including Christians, are looking for ways to be involved in the public square that transcend the sour tone and brutal tactics,” said one of the movement’s founders. “Election Day Communion reflects the public’s dissatisfaction with government [and] political parties.”¹

The article goes on to say that gathering to the Communion Table on Election Day is “ideal for remembering the church’s nonpartisan mission: to bridge personal divides, refocus allegiance to God (not party) and work for justice beyond the ballot box. “We’ll be saying to people: ‘Look around. There’s probably someone here who voted for the other guy,’”

I don’t know where you are checking in from this morning. In a few moments, we will be invited to gather to the Communion Table, to pull out what bread we might have in the cupboard, to fill what cup we might keep on the shelf. These are hardly the things we are used to having when we meet together in church. Typically, someone else provides the bread for us, and someone else fills the cup. That we are going to pick them out for ourselves this morning might cause us to wonder what bread and which cup we should

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/election-day-communion-aims-to-heal-the-partisan-breach/2012/10/22/425eb86c-1c8a-11e2-8817-41b9a7aaabc7_story.html?fbclid=IwAR0R7QJkBKvDfiqvZ5XMuvstXH5IUgSzMM-Mfbt387nbkc234WpyEgNHH1o

choose. Is it okay if all we have is a paper cup? What about our favorite coffee mug or sippy cup? Does the cup have to be filled only with water, wine, or grape juice? Will I be accused of bending the rules if I use sparkling cider instead? And what about the bread? Is it required that Communion Bread start out as a whole loaf? Will sliced Wonder Bread do the trick? So long as I'm giving thanks in my heart for the grain of the earth, can a pumpkin muffin from Starbucks serve as my Communion Bread? Then there is the consideration of the table itself. How can we call it a table of communion if we are all scattered about in our homes, none of us being together? How is it communion if it's just me sitting at my kitchen table? Is it mockery to use my lap as my Communion Table, because I'm pretty sure a few of you are sitting on your couch right now with your feet up. And speaking of you, I see you out there. I know how long you've been praying and how hard you've been working. I see your discouragement over our politics, I see your shoulders sagging from the burden of anxiety. I see you step confidently forward and then hesitantly back. I see you doing your best to keep faith in our better angels. And I see that look of skepticism in your eyes as you now consider what, if anything, is going to happen when you, *you*, try to turn a slice of Wonder Bread into the body of Christ.

With no disrespect meant to the organizers of Election Day Communion, it's enough for me just to imagine that you and I are together at the table this morning, let alone that what we are doing has the power to heal the partisan breach and gather a nation together as one. For the record, I want to believe Communion has this kind of unifying power, but too many times do I come to the table with the kind of blind idealism that believes everything will be made better if we just make sure everyone gets a seat and some bread. As if the only proof we might need to assure ourselves we are not as divided as we appear is to have Donald Trump and Joe Biden sit down together at the Communion Table and shared some bread today. Isn't this what we say, "All are welcome here." This is not a Congregational table or an Episcopal table or a Baptist table. This is not a table only for the faithful, or for the unfaithful. This is the Lord's table, and so all are welcome here—Joe Biden and Donald Trump. "Look around, there's probably someone here who voted for the other guy." And sure enough, if this is the Lord's table, if Jesus gets to be both host and bouncer today, then

the Communion Table is indeed wide, and the welcome is indeed great. For what do we know of the people Jesus sat down at the table with?

In his letter to the church at Corinth, Paul writes this: “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you.’” Of all the things Paul could have passed on to the church about Communion, the thing he chooses to highlight is that it’s a meal involving betrayal. No mention of what kind of bread to use. No instructions on what to do in a pandemic when you have to gather without gathering. Doesn’t he know that would have been helpful information for us?! No lesson in metaphysics on what Jesus means when he hands out bread and calls it his body. If only Paul had known how much of a stink we would end up making over that one, I’m sure he would have chosen to focus his comments differently. Instead, he points out only that Communion has its root in betrayal. Put another way, unity has its roots in division. Peace has its roots in conflict.

For those who might prefer to avoid conflict, or to pretend it away, you might want to decline this dinner invitation. But for those who know the pain and struggle of being part of a church, or a marriage, or a friendship, or a working relationship, that has known conflict and betrayal, and who have worried over how to shut it down before it shuts you down, Communion is your kind of dinner party.

When the Psalmist writes, “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies,” the point is: whoever this meal is being prepared for, they have enemies at the table. When Jesus shared in his last supper with his disciples, he did so in full view of Judas, whom he knew was about to betray him. The Communion Table is not a neutral zone where we forget who our enemies are, and where we treat them like friends. In fact, when we do that, we are in danger of creating a unity based on false standards, a unity that is the very antithesis of the Gospel and all that Jesus stood for: giving refuge to the migrant poor, protecting those whose lives are being victimized by the powers of racism and bigotry, toppling the rich in their efforts to build a system that works only for them. Sharing the

unity of bread with those who would not themselves feed the hungry is like crying “peace, peace!” when there is no peace. It is like teaming up with the religious leaders and the Roman government to have Jesus crucified because it is less costly for us to have him killed than it is for us to follow him.

Years ago, I read a story about a young pastor in the deep south who was working in his office one Sunday morning in April 1968, just two weeks after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. Across the hall from his office a couple deacons were preparing the bread and the cup that would soon be put on the Communion Table, the bread and the cup that would be broken and poured out like the body and blood of Jesus, that would be given to the church as signs of grace. “I’ll tell you, that black preacher man really got what was coming to him,” the pastor overheard one say to the other. They said this while handling the bread and the cup, the bread and the cup that are to us the body and blood of Jesus, who was also killed as a victim of fear and hatred; killed by us, for us.

When it came time for Communion that day, time to break the bread and pour the cup of Jesus, the young pastor stood behind the table, and lifting the bread and the cup, he told the church what he had just heard in a back room. “This bread and this cup has been prepared for us today with hands that do not look, or feel, or touch the world like the hands of Jesus do. This bread is not the body and blood of Christ today, and so I cannot give it to you.” He put the bread and cup back on the table and walked out. The next week that young pastor was not invited back to church.

Soon, we will gather to the Communion Table. Spread out from one another as we are, perhaps it won’t be too hard to welcome each other, to break bread and pass it along without notice of who is an enemy and who is a friend. My guess is though, with or without our Communion Tables, we know who is who. Jesus did. Jesus knew who Judas was, and what Judas was up to even as he sat there at the table with him. “Go ahead,” he told him, “go ahead and do what you have to do, betray me.” Some of our conflicts are too important to give up on, even in the name of unity. Some things are worth fighting over, even if it means we’re the ones who are going to do down for the count.

In the end, Jesus still gives Judas bread, just as he still gives it to you and me. Does that make us the enemy or the friend? I couldn't say. I believe it just makes us invited guests with bread of our own now to share.