



YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

October 7, 2012, World Communion Sunday

Acts 2:37-47

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Gracious God, we know your table is wide and your welcome is wider. We ask now that you gather us in and open our hearts to receive your grace. Help us to trust that your Word and love are enough, and that our aching and sorrow will be met with bread and cup. As we hear your Word and feast at your table, transform us into bread for a hungry world and drink for those who thirst. And everywhere, in our worship and our world, let us keep the feast and be transformed by your grace. Amen.

On the outskirts of Nairobi, Kenya, the African Church of the Holy Spirit begins their worship service by marching through the streets of their village singing and dancing with instruments in order to rally more believers into their church. After the sermon, an elder of the congregation stands to pray and drive out the evil spirits.

In Basel, Switzerland, the ecumenical patriarch blesses a new Orthodox Church and pours holy chrism, or oil, over the altar. This oil is a visible sign of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and it is also used in worship to anoint the newly baptized. After the space is blessed, the community gathers together to celebrate Holy Communion.

In Seoul, South Korea, the Yoido Full Gospel Church packs six different worship services each week with roughly 25,000 people in each service. As men and women leave worship they are greeted by elders from the church who bow as a way of thanking them for coming. The church is the largest Pentecostal church in the world, and their services are watched around the world on television and the internet.



In eastern Syria, the worship of the Syrian Orthodox cathedral in Hassake includes ancient liturgy and the practice of the sacraments. Many of the Christians living there can trace their roots back to the time of Jesus, and some of them even still speak Aramaic, the ancient language of that time. In the midst of violence and war, they draw together to witness to the love of Jesus.

In Seattle, Washington, in the middle of the financial district, the Church of Mary Magdalene is an ecumenical congregation comprised of former and current homeless women. This church provides social services and counseling as well as worship where all of the women are able to take part.¹ They provide “a safe environment to build relationships, experience hope and love, and explore faith.”²

And in New York City, at Brick Presbyterian Church we gather this morning to worship with liturgy and music, to hear the voice of Scripture, and to come to the table for the Lord’s Supper. All over the world today, Christians are praising God through varieties of worship styles and in thousands of languages. Today, on World Communion Sunday we celebrate how the Holy Spirit is moving and working all over the world, from Africa to Europe, and from Asia to the Americas. We rejoice together in the feast Christ has prepared for all Christians of the world.

About two thousand years ago, in a growing community in Jerusalem the Church was just getting started. “Day by day, they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”³ As we give thanks for the Christian Church throughout the world, the passage from Acts this morning reminds us of that first Church and those first Christians two thousand years ago. The day of Pentecost was no ordinary event. People were gathered from all over the known world for a festival in Jerusalem, and when the Holy Spirit came the disciples, who were Judean, were able to speak in the native tongues of the crowds. In the midst

¹ The information on all these communities came from a resource from the World Council of Churches called *Keeping the Faith*. http://www.keeping-the-faith.info/in_id.html

² From the church’s website: http://www.churchofmarymagdalene.org/Church_of_Mary_Magdalene/Home.html

³ Acts 2:46-47



of this diversity, the Church was born. Today, as we celebrate the Christian Church in all its forms, it's important that we reflect back on its first days.

The passage that Daniel read from Acts tells the story of that first community of Christians—a community that began with worship, shared fellowship and shared possessions. Most important, for today, that community began their life together around the table. That community, like the millions of churches that grew out of her, celebrated Jesus' life, death and resurrection with potluck meals, a little wine and fellowship, and one family meal after another. They were a loving Church, adding more and more people to their number each day, and they devoted themselves to eating together. Table fellowship was just as important as worship and stewardship.

Several years ago, TIME magazine ran a couple of photo essays on its website based on pictures taken in the 2005 book, *Hungry Planet: What the World Eats*.⁴ In each one of the photos, members of a family are gathered in their kitchens, with the food they would consume in a normal week spread all around them on their table and counters. Below their pictures are written their native country and city, their weekly food cost in American dollars and quotes from the family about some of their favorite foods and recipes. The families span the globe: from Japan to Italy, Kuwait to the United States, Chad to Ecuador. Although their food choices are different and expenditures around the globe vary dramatically, the common image is the table fellowship of each family. Some sit on the floor, some sit in chairs or in their living rooms, and others sit outside. Wherever they gather, eating together, sharing a meal, is what constitutes their family.

At my previous church, the pastor I served with was convinced that we could do more in worship to engage our senses, not just seeing and hearing, but also smelling. He came up with the idea of placing a bread maker by the air vents of the sanctuary each communion Sunday. Early Sunday morning a woman in the church would arrive before anyone else, having already prepared the ingredients, and set the bread maker to baking. By the time we all gathered in the sanctuary for worship, the space was filled with the aroma of homemade bread. During the prelude on those mornings, I would watch as people whispered to one another, "Do

⁴ TIME Magazine, photo essay, <http://www.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1626519,00.html>

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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you smell that?,” “Where is that coming from?” and “Is there a meal after church?” Then, during our hymn of the table, our bread maker would ~~remove~~ the loaf out of the machine and bring it to the table. I had the privilege on many of those mornings of saying the Words of Institution, and when I would break the bread, as if on cue, steam would begin rising from the loaf. I have never seen a congregation so eager to take communion in my life. I could see their mouths watering as they walked forward to the table. One by one, members received a piece of freshly baked bread, dipped it into the cup, and returned to their pews having been nourished. Our family connection grew on those Sundays during communion, because the smell and taste of that bread brought us even closer to table fellowship in the family kitchen.

Similar to the book *Hungry Planet*, in the Church we could create our own photo spread with the many and varied ways we celebrate communion around the world. There are sourdough breads, pita loaves, rice cakes, muffins, challah, flatbread and unleavened wafers. Some churches use the same grape juice we do, but others celebrate communion with wine, some red and some white. Even more, those who don't have grapes growing in their land use a common drink for their people like coffee, tea or juice. Then there is the tableware: from silver to gold to pottery to baskets—the cups and plates we use in the Church span the globe as well. But despite all this diversity, the point is that that Church, all over the world, gathers around one table. Like that first Church community two thousand years ago, we hold table fellowship as a mark of the church. As a family, we join together in this shared meal, and become united by the food we eat.

This kind of eclectic diversity shouldn't be news to us in the city. When I looked at some of the images in the book *Hungry Planet*, the foods on those tables can be found all over our city. Very few of the meals were images I had never seen. They may not be on my dinner table each night, but our diverse city is full of various dining options and grocery stores. It would be all too easy in one week, to eat meals from all over the world and never leave Manhattan.

In our diverse city, it might be easy to overlook a day like World Communion Sunday. After all, our streets are the streets in which we hear multiple languages being spoken. Our neighborhoods provide us with a plethora of ethnic food options, and our own children grow up almost always learning more than one



language. On any given weekend we can attend a variety of ethnic parades and celebrations, each highlighting the people and culture of a nation other than our own. More than almost anywhere else in the country, in New York City we are surrounded by our world's diversity. We couldn't ignore it if we wanted to; it's as much a part of our city's culture as our own heritage.

But I think that's why we need this Sunday all the more. Because diversity is such a part of New York City, it's something we often overlook or take for granted. Or we assume that we celebrate it when we really don't. World Communion Sunday highlights not how much we love ethnic food or how many languages we or our children can speak—it highlights that whether or not we know it, whether or not we attend to it—the Church is much bigger than our congregation, our traditions or our faith practices here. It's even bigger than our city. "The Body of Christ goes far beyond those who circle the table in our little church ... it is extended to those whom we will most likely never meet, which in turn compels us to live in the world as if every person is a brother or sister in Christ."⁵

So we celebrate this Sunday, not because we're better at diversity than other cities or states, but because we are called to remember the entire body of Christ when we gather for communion. You are what you eat. We, together, are the body of Christ, and when we eat that bread and drink that cup, we proclaim that we are a part of something unique—Jesus' globe-spanning body. His table is a table that includes people from all nations, breads from all over the world. When we eat at this table we take on the international flavor of Christ's body and the unifying power of his Lordship. The body of the Church is celebrated, in all its diversity and beauty, each time we gather. Jesus told us that people would come from east and west, north and south to sit at table with him,⁶ and we do. We will. As one. We are what we eat.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Bruce Reyes-Chow, <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Why-I-Take-Communion?offset=1&max=1#Chow>

⁶ Luke 13:29.

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