

Bread and Wine, Tea and Pastry [World Communion Sunday]

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I've always been a big fan of World Communion Sunday. There's something truly inspiring about Christians from all different backgrounds and countries, gathering around the Table as One Family of Faith. And while the image of this global, eclectic Family inspires me deeply, it has recently been augmented by an even deeper and more comprehensive vision. On a Wednesday evening last month, Pilgrim Hall was filled to capacity, as people from throughout the area gathered for an event called *Teatime for Peace*. This was a wonderful opportunity for people of diverse faith communities to get to know one another, and to celebrate our shared beliefs and concerns, humanity and hopes. Following a brief presentation on some basic facts [and fictions] about the Islamic Faith, the majority of the evening was spent sharing tea and pastry and conversation around the table. Everyone told stories about their family's journey to the U.S.; spoke about ways in which their faith or Life philosophy inspires and guides them; and talked about things we can all do to promote respect and understanding for one another.

The evening officially concluded with a rousing singing of *Let There Be Peace on Earth*, and then all were free to go; however, the majority of people *didn't* go! Small group and one-on-one conversations immediately picked-up again, many flowing-out into the parking lot. Individuals were exchanging contact information, as well as warm hugs and handshakes. It seems as if - infused within the *physical* sharing of tea and pastry - there was a *spiritual* sharing of openness and affirmation, connection and community. For many of those who gathered around the table, that evening offered a Sacred Moment - a *Sacrament*, one might say. [That is, if one doesn't mind being labeled as a deranged heretic; which I don't!] For me, that Teatime event - kind of like our Coffee Hour - carried the power of an extended and expanded Communion Meal.

Now I certainly don't mean to downplay the profound power or purpose of Holy Communion, especially on this World Communion Sunday. On the contrary, today I'd like to raise-up the importance of taking this Sacrament *more* seriously, by taking ourselves *less* seriously! I'd like us Christians to "humbly confess" that the power which Holy Communion contains and

conveys, comes exclusively from the Holy One, and not from our own personal or denominational claims to understand, interpret, or control it! I'd like us all to do-away with the restrictive practices that push-away others from this Divine Gift of Grace. And I'd like us to raise-up a renewed image of Holy Communion: One that looks less like a dreary funeral service for the dearly departed, and more like a joyful reunion with the best friend a person could ever have!

World Communion Sunday presents an excellent opportunity for us Christians to demonstrate that we actually believe that Christ's love is strong enough to overcome any doubts or differences, confusion or fears that we might have! It's also the perfect occasion for us to stop treating the Body of Christ as exclusively "ours", and to understand that every person in this world is a loved and cherished Child of the Holy One - and therefore welcome at Christ's Table! That's why we at Brecksville United Church of Christ always extend to *all* who are present, a specific and sincere invitation to partake of the Bread and Cup. We embrace and treasure a Faith which recognizes the inter-connectedness of *all* our lives - regardless of one's faith tradition. A Faith which shows us, that to truly honor the "*Body of Christ*" means more than diagnosing other people's *spiritual* condition. It means caring for the physical needs of their bodies! It's a Faith that calls us to reach-out and help *all* our neighbors in need, just like Jesus does!

Jesus doesn't just talk about feeding the hungry, he does it! He doesn't preach about free health care for the poor, he provides it! He doesn't simply suggest that men treat women with respect and dignity, he shows it by his personal behavior. He not only believes in the abundance of Divine Compassion and Grace - he faithfully shares that abundance at every opportunity! Jesus Christ proclaims and embodies the *Good News*: that though our human tendency is to fearfully push-away people we perceive as being different or deficient, the Divine Desire is to lovingly gather us all around the Table as One Family.

Jesus offers the Sacrament of Communion as a celebration of his life - and his love - which transcends culture, race, and religion; as well as betrayal, denial, and even death itself! He gives the first "Holy Communion" to a group of *Jewish* people, including a couple of guys named Judas and Peter - both of whom are about to betray his trust and friendship. This group has absolutely no idea what Jesus is talking about, when he calls the bread his body, and the wine his blood. He says to them "Take and eat", not "take

and understand and interpret.” “Take and eat - this is *for* you, just as I am for you!” So they take it and share it with one another; trusting that Jesus’ love for them is strong enough to overcome any doubts or confusion, fears or failings that they might have.

This morning, as you and I eat and drink together [up here, and down in Pilgrim Hall] we not only remember Jesus Christ; we are also empowered to *re-member* the Body of Christ: to extend a gracious welcome to all God’s children who have been cut-off and excluded, and to help them re-connect. And even though this isn’t a big “meal” that we share, because we do *share* it with all who desire, it is a big deal! It connects us to all our sisters and brothers throughout the world, *and* throughout time. It awakens within us that age-old practice of extending hospitality to strangers and sojourners. It links us to the ancient Hebrew Passover Story, and sets us free from our *own* slavery to fear and prejudice, self-centeredness and narrow-mindedness. It opens our minds and our hearts to a Christ-like compassion and grace - reminding us that the invitation to unity, inclusivity, and peace is an invitation that is extended to all!