

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Gifts and Sweetness

Rev. Sara Goodman

Sunday November 3, 2019

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

328 Maple Street Mahtomedi, MN 55115

651.426.2369 ext 103 sgoodman@wbuuc.org

READINGS

Our first reading is *New People Came This Time* By [Geoffrey Herbert](#)

New People came this time, and we shared
our stories, the familiar truths, about
shock and healing and being glad that at last
our children can say who they are,
and we know them now, love them more.

Funny stories and good news ripple around,
and smiles about [queer] ways, and jokes,
against ourselves, taking the masks off
to show the same donkey faces underneath.
A communion of laughter.

And several dawns once more lit up among us,
the sharpness of beginning sight,
a slower sunrise over the years,
other eye-openings—painful or proud—all good.
A communion of wisdom.

But this time—

we nearly all wept:
wept with the blinding new hurts,
wincing with what we thought
had been healed—old wounds, waiting.
We put the tissue box in the middle
and passed it round.
A communion of tears.

The second reading is from 20th Century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead,

"...the secret of happiness lies in knowing this: that we live by the law of expenditure. We find the greatest joy not in getting, but in expressing what we are. There are tides in the ocean of life, and what comes in depends on what goes out. The currents flow inward only where there is an outlet. Nature does not give to those who will not spend; her gifts are merely loaned to those who will not use them. Empty your lungs and breathe. Run, climb, work, and laugh; the more you give out, the more you shall receive. Be exhausted, and you shall be fed. [Our] gladness is not in taking and holding, but in doing, the striving, the building, the living. It is a higher joy to teach than to be taught. It is good to get justice, but better to do it; fun to have things, but more fun to make them."

SERMON

As we kick off our monthly theme of Communion the Practice of Offering, I realized that we can't talk about communion without talking about Christianity, as communion is one of the founding tenants of the religion. As we heard last month, when we spoke about Church, the Practice of Gathering, we as a Unitarian Universalist church don't follow Christian Doctrine although we do come from Christian roots.

Communion, or Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper as it is variously called in different Protestant and Catholic settings, is a symbolic ritual where members of the congregation share bread and wine – or their stand ins: Wafer and Juice. This ritual happens regularly as part of the life of the church and in some cases is a way to signify membership in the community.

The way this ritual has evolved over two thousand years is related to culture and power and its roots speak to me of the significance of our continued use of the term Communion.

There is a significant amount of research now to suggest that the early Christian church was formed by people gathering for meals, groups of people that could fit in people's homes.

The formative time of Christianity, when the stories we now know as the bible were still spreading word-of-mouth, not yet written and canonized and into the first 200 years of the church; when the messages of all embracing love and resistance to the forces of unjust power were still in their early times, shared by a small population of people spread across the Mediterranean; The followers of Jesus met at meals, to share the lessons learned from the stories of a powerfully loving teacher. Shared in community, sharing meals in the ways that most people shared meals in this part of the world at this time, they met to practice one of the rituals that would become the mainstay of Christianity: holy communion. Modeled after the last supper: to eat from a shared table and drink from a shared cup and remember.

Meals in the early Christian gatherings mirrored the meals shared by Jews in Jerusalem and by Pagans throughout the Hellenic world at the time. Folks gathered in one another's homes, around a low, u-shaped table, sitting or lounging on cushions on the floor. Meals would begin with breaking bread to share, followed by eating the meal and entertaining each other, which would take hours, as it was meant to be an experience of leisure, connection, and conversation, and would close with the "taking of a cup", which I would translate to mean drinking one last glass of wine and saying a blessing.

Holy Communion, then, was a family meal, a banquet, a celebration of and way to build close connections, a time to talk and eat, sing and share. Our Wednesday evening meals here are a way to do some of these same things! We come together weekly to share a meal and then to spend an hour or more doing Soulwork – using our bodies and minds to deepen our spiritual lives together.

We *could* call our dinners a communion in the sense of the original meaning in the early Christian gatherings. But maybe we can call them a communion in the sense the poet Geoffrey Herbert speaks of when he says

*“New People came this time, and we shared
our stories, the familiar truths, about shock and healing and being glad that at last
our children can say who they are,
and we know them now, love them more.*

*Funny stories and good news ripple around,
and smiles about [Queer] ways, and jokes, against ourselves, taking the masks off to show the
same donkey faces underneath.
A communion of laughter.*

*And several dawns once more lit up among us,
the sharpness of beginning sight,
a slower sunrise over the years,
other eye-openings—painful or proud—all good.
A communion of wisdom.*

But this time—

*we nearly all wept:
wept with the blinding new hurts,
wincing with what we thought
had been healed—old wounds, waiting.
We put the tissue box in the middle
and passed it round.
A communion of tears.”*

We come into community seeking something, something big, something seemingly small, we come to the table looking for something, and we can come and find it here. We come to share laughter, at ourselves, at the absurdity of life. We come to share wisdom, stories and lessons of lives lived. We come to share tears, new hurts and old wounds, and heal.

"Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation" writes bell hooks, "Healing is an act of communion." Healing is an act of community. Healing is an act that is rarely completed alone.

We "come into this place to touch and be touch, to heal and be healed, to forgive and be forgiven." We are invited every week with our Call to Worship to seek this kind of community here. And we do, we seek and find it.

But we only find it here because so many people have brought their gifts to share. The people who make this place a home come with their packs full of grief and love and homemade goodies, with their arms open to give and receive hugs, with their hearts open to hold the joy and sorrows that we share together as a community.

We can find healing here because so many people have brought healing into this community. We find laughter here because so many people bring their humor and joy with them. We find wisdom here because so many of us bring our wisdom, our stories, AND our questions and

confusions. We find tears as we heal fresh wounds because so many of us have brought our wounds, healed, and now can share our old scars.

Bringing ourselves into this community makes it what it is.

We show this symbolically in the two services a year that we call “communion” – in September we celebrate a water communion and in June we celebrate a Flower communion. These two communion services are services that bring the gifts of our community together to be shared by all.

In September, we ask you to bring water to a shared bowl that we then use to bless the hands of the congregation. We bring the water from places that are meaningful to us, from far away and from our homes. We bring water from the taps here at church. We bring water to share, and as the waters mix, they become part of the fabric of our community, and are used to bless the hands and the work of the people of this congregation.

In June, we ask you to bring flowers from your garden, from the roadside, or flowers that you purchased to help make a gorgeous display of flowers that illustrates how important each individual person is to the community, as each flower and blossom make the whole bouquet more beautiful. Each person is then gifted with a flower to take with them to remind them of this place and these people.

When we participate in these rituals, we recognize that what we bring is just as important as what we take away. If we all decided not to bring flowers, or not to bring water, we wouldn't be able to have a ritual with the same depth or meaning.

Like in the story Amy shared with us earlier, when the people in power in the town all decided that they didn't need to bring the wine they were expected to bring to the table, when the leaders each failed to see the value of their contribution to the feast, they let down the entire community, but none more-so than themselves.

The lesson is, if you want to get something from a gathering, you have to bring something to the gathering. If you want to get something from this community, you need to bring something to this community.

We need to bring our gifts and sweetness in order to receive gifts and sweetness. These words come from the poem *Blessing for the Senses* by John O'Donohue: ... “when you partake Of food and drink, May your taste quicken To the gift and sweetness That flows from the earth.”

We all have gifts to bring to this community, even when we feel like we have nothing to give. Sometimes we're in a place where all we can do is show up to the feast with our hunger. And that is enough.

Sometimes we don't think we have something to share, but when we take the time to reflect, perhaps with a trusted companion, we start to recognize our gifts and their sweetness, maybe finding a way to share them. And sometimes, like the elder in our story, we know that our lives are so full of blessings that we are overflowing with gifts to bring to the community table.

We all have gifts to share, and the more generously we can share them, the more the whole community thrives.

20th Century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, said that "...the secret of happiness lies in knowing this: that we live by the law of expenditure." In other words, he explains "*We find the greatest joy not in getting, but in expressing what we are. There are tides in the ocean of life, and what comes in depends on what goes out. The currents flow inward only where there is an outlet. ... the more you give out, the more you shall receive. Be exhausted, and you shall be fed. [Our] gladness is not in taking and holding, but in doing, the striving, the building, the living. It is a higher joy to teach than to be taught. It is good to get justice, but better to do it; fun to have things, but more fun to make them.*"

How do you give in this community? Do you show up twice a week or more for supper, Soulwork, and committee meetings? Do you bring yourself here every few Sundays, when the timing is right, and still find yourself at home? Do you participate in a small group, or classes, or justice causes? Do you sing in the Choir, cook meals once a month, or facilitate a class with our kids? Do you refuse to sing in public, or take your kids to religious education to get some time to yourself?

Do you make sandwiches, bake cookies, pull weeds, put up and take down art? Do you eat cookies, admire the grounds, and spend time exploring the art?

Do you greet people with a program on Sunday mornings, or independently speak to a person you've never met every time you're here? Do you sneak in, sit here in the pews for the sermon then sneak out again before anyone has the chance to talk to you?

Do you walk a long distance from your car, or come early to find a good spot? Do you drive the shuttle? Do you ride in the shuttle?

Do you wonder sometimes if anyone even notices if you're here or not? Do you take meals to families in need? Do you need meals to be delivered? If you do any of these things, you are giving to our community.

Even when what we have to give is our hunger, our need, even that can serve the whole community, especially when it means that we can come together to support each other.

As a congregation, as we are doing work on visioning this fall, part of what we want to know from you is: When you come here what do you hope to take away? And I would then ask, what is it that you hope to give?