

Sermon: August 16, 2020 – 1 Corinthians 11: 23-26
Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB

Watch at <https://youtu.be/Bk2N5UunVQ4>

When we are at our best, Christians embody their faith. We look to Jesus Christ as an embodiment, or incarnation, of the Divine, referred to in the gospel of John as “the Word made Flesh.” God’s presence in the person of Jesus, expresses that this physical world and these physical bodies are places where we experience holiness, sacredness, Divine acceptance, and love. Theologians like Marcus Borg (pp.39-54) encourage us to view salvation, not as some deferred exit plan from life, but as “liberation from bondage...rescue from peril...return from exile,” all of which happen here, in the real, embodied lives lived by flesh-and-blood human beings. Yes, we do hope in life beyond this life, but in the Bible, the things we experience physically, matter... and shape our relationships with God, our neighbour, and the earth. We focus not only on heaven, but on this world, tangible actions accompanying our prayers.

So if embodiment is so important; if actions express our faith; if our physical presence to one another is a means by which the love of God is made known, how in the world do we carry on with those things, at a time when we still cannot, in the interests of public health, be fully present to one another? How do I convey my sympathy to you in your challenges or losses, without the possibility of an embrace? How do I welcome you, when there is no physical space we will be sharing, when a handshake is out of the question? And more to the point today, how do we share communion, that time when we gather at Christ’s table of love, without breaking one loaf, sharing one cup, gathering hip-to-hip in the pews of our usual home base?

This got me thinking a lot this week, of what it means to be present to one another. While it would be a mistake to imagine that everyone in the world has equal access to technology – not only are even the simplest devices unaffordable for many people world-wide, just plop yourself down in many Canadian communities struggling to even maintain dial-up and tell me how satisfactory your video-conferencing experience was – the reality is that in the past fifteen years there has been an explosion of technology, with smartphones and their apps, in particular, changing the way people relate to one another in a great many nations of the world. Once the pandemic was declared, many workers transitioned, with varying degrees of smoothness, to working remotely from home, and countless organizations moved in a matter of days, from in-person meetings to meetings by videoconference. We have remained in touch with one another, by phone, by Zoom, by Facebook and Instagram and SnapChat and YouTube. Even email, used properly, keeps us connected, lets us know we have not been forgotten.

Is it the same as meeting in the flesh? No, it isn’t, and nobody would say it is. But right from the beginnings of the Christian Church, we have understood that being present to one another is not limited to our interactions with those we can meet face-to-face.

Our gospel reading for today, is from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, his sharing the tradition of the Lord’s Supper as it had been conveyed to him by Christ Jesus. Before going any further, let’s pause for a moment and think of the implications of that sentence: Paul, who never met Jesus during his earthly ministry, has, from Christ, something to convey. So there’s instance #1 of not being face-to-face, yet fully connected: the spiritual, prayerful connection of Paul and the risen Christ. And having received that message from Christ, Paul writes a letter – instance #2 – which is first of all relayed to the young Church in the city of Corinth, and then – instance #3 – spread far and wide for all Churches to hear. Without being present at all, an awful lot happened.

In his book, *Don’t Know Much About the Bible*, Kenneth Davis reminds us (p.435) that “the early Christians were forced to improvise, working from ‘word of mouth,’ worshiping without benefit of

books and established rituals.... Paul's epistles, or letters to churches and individuals around the Mediterranean world, were the first written documents of the early Christian church.... They went out to the early churches, just as Jewish leaders in Jerusalem had earlier sent letters to Jewish communities spread throughout the Mediterranean to instruct or mediate... These letters, which constitute nearly one half of the New Testament, cited Hebrew scripture, as well as Jesus, and include some of the most memorable phrases in Christian history." In a situation where Paul could not just hop on a plane and pop in to Corinth for the weekend, his carefully crafted words – sometimes pastoral, sometimes pointed, always personal – were his way of being present to his fractious friends in Corinth.

I know first-hand from my dozen years working as the front-line communicator at a school of 1000 students who came from all over Calgary, that authentic communication can happen in many different ways. Countless times, I would come to know someone really personally by phone and email, sometimes for two or three years before meeting them face to face. I knew their tone, we understood each other's sense of humour, I may have even been included in life transitions in their home. Meeting them in person was always a good thing to do – and sometimes, quite a surprise – but our *relationship* didn't wait til then. We were present to one another in the honesty of open communication, long before we were in the same physical space.

That, I believe, is a gift to be cherished: the ways that we can be present to one another, in phone calls and FaceTime and letter mail and text messages. Being present to those we have never met is a huge part of our Christian heritage, witnessing to the Good News of Jesus Christ and his embodied message of radically inclusive, reconciling love through the words of Paul and the gospel writers, built on the foundations of the prophets and Psalmists, and writers of Torah. From age to age, from continent to continent, God's love has been conveyed through words from afar, written and spoken and signed and embossed in braille. In the best of times, that love comes to be enacted in very personal, embodied ways, but even then, our God-connection through scripture and prayer is a relationship that goes beyond physical presence.

What about communion, though? Admittedly, that gets a bit trickier, especially depending on what you believe about the Lord's Supper. If your beliefs about communion are heavily reliant on the clergy's authority to convey God's blessing upon this particular bread and cup, or mediating this bread and this wine becoming the very body and blood of Christ, it will be challenging to have communion apart from that. And some denominations have expressly forbidden communion by Zoom or YouTube, and it's not my job to argue against their right to express their beliefs in those ways.

But where I end up, is with an understanding that in the same way that my emails and phone calls helped me to truly "know" parents at the school long before we met face to face (and in some cases, we NEVER met face to face but I still count them as friends), communion, in person or by distance, still has the power to confirm God's loving intention toward the world and our loving intention toward God and neighbour. Chris Ridgeway, writing on the Christianity Today website in March of this year, puts it this way:

"The means of digital communication have become ordinary and invisible to our most meaningful relationships. We laugh and cry and express intimacy and frustration with a cross-cut of iMessage and emojis, FaceTime and Instagram stories. We challenge our best friend on workout apps and ask private medical questions via telehealth.... [our] daily digital culture has shaped our interactions to the point that human presence is not synonymous to physicality." He then applies this understanding that we our digital presence to one another is a true presence to one another – and continues on, to speak of communion. "Nearly all Christians agree: There is a holy mystery in how God is present to us at the Table. In the language of communications, I

assert the presence of Jesus is mediated. Mediated in the bread and the wine, the Holy Spirit, and the people of God (the body of Christ). Mediated like the truth and intimacy of an 'I love you' text message." In conclusion, he writes that even when received in our homes rather than in a physical gathering, we are dealing with "Real bodies. Real bread. And the real presence of the Triune God." I would agree.

So whether you've showered, dressed and come to Church, or are at home in your pyjamas, when we intend to be at table with Jesus, we are at table with Jesus, for His invitation to us is ever-present. In communion we state once more our alignment with Christ's rejection of judgmentalism and exclusion; we commit ourselves to a world of healing, health and wholeness for all; and we are left speechless at the power of grace which totally transcends anything we can put into words, awestruck at Christ's desire that we be renewed as a world-wide community of reconciliation and forgiveness and a new way illumined by love. My understanding, of being part of such a global community shaped by Christ, may even be strengthened by the knowledge that anyone in the world with YouTube access may at this moment be preparing their bread and cup. There is so much that I do not and will never understand about sacraments, these sacred rites passed on from generation to generation, and I don't believe that our commitment to public health is capable of undercutting the invisible and unexplainable presence of God in bread broken and shared, whether it is one loaf broken with us all together, or many instances of bread and cup in many different homes.

And so, with thankfulness, we continue to stay safe by keeping distance, and we continue to know Christ's inspiring love by remembering his powerful presence in an upper room, two thousand years ago and ten thousand kilometres away. As we take our bread or cracker or matzo, our wine or juice, together in many places, we gather in love. In this act of sacred re-enactment, boundaries of time and space mean nothing, for Christ is here...wherever "here" may be.

"Through Christ, with Christ, and in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory is yours, God most holy, now and forever. Amen." (A Sunday Liturgy, p. 37)

References cited:

Borg, Marcus. Speaking Christian. NYC: HarperOne, 2011.

The United Church of Canada: "A Sunday Liturgy", 1984.

Davis, Kenneth C. Don't know much about the Bible. NYC: HarperCollins, 1998.

Ridgeway, Chris. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/online-communion-can-still-be-sacramental.html>

See also:

A Song of Faith, found in the United Church Manual (2019) https://www.united-church.ca/sites/default/files/the-manual-2019_0.pdf page 26, lines 245-289.

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