

World Communion – Joined in Joy, Bound in Brokenness

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

The paraphrase read this morning, while Bible scholars agree it isn't an authentic Paul letter, it does have his spirit. It was very common to sign another person's name to a writing in order to lift up the cause during the church's infancy. This was a letter from a mentor, imprisoned for their beliefs, to their protégé, Thomas.

This is a letter written out of strong conviction. Pun intended. Two important parts to this letter's message: first that this faith, this inclination to love God and to follow Jesus, is a gift from our ancestors; and, second, that following Jesus will bring with it a cost, sometimes a great cost.

These rich Bible stories offer us a lens through which to look at our own lives. My own story is an unusual one for my generation; I grew up watching my parents active in church life, while my closest friends rarely saw the inside of a church. My grandparents also were deeply connected to their church communities, and they modelled for me what I now know as a "Christian" – generous, deeply involved in community work, attending worship regularly. Everything had at the heart of it, community: dinners, youth group, different causes that we rallied behind. The people of the church became my extended family. I also learned to *grieve* in church, going through the rituals even as my world learned to deny and ignore death if it could.

In short, I was connected to community. Church gave me a vocabulary for this particular experience, using often the metaphor of the "Body of Christ" – each of us like part of that Body, feeling one another's joys and pain. I'm wondering: *How did you come to become part of this Body called Church? Was it family who brought you to worship or to a church group? Was it a friend who in youth or adult life invited you to come with them to church?* Perhaps you recently arrived here at St. Andrew's, but whatever your experience, take a moment to give thanks to God for that person, or those people, who invited you to try out "Church".

Caring, being deeply interconnected as like a Body of Christ, means that we intentionally adopt values that are at times going to run counter to our culture, might *grate* with our friends, and perhaps even alienate you from family. The namesake of Paul today is writing his letter from a prison cell, his public faith coming at a great cost. There are obvious stories, heroic figures whose faith cost them a great deal - from Joan of Arc to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. But I need to say that playing out in many modern-day households are risky conversations - passionate, challenging, heartfelt discussions that will generate conflict. For example, the federal election, with its many issues at stake like the environment, immigration, the economy. Who we vote for as Christians is very theological. All I will ask of you, as followers of Jesus each in your own way, is: *As you vote, think about who represents the values and community that you believe God is making (that is, God's kin-dom on earth as in heaven)?*

There is a cost to following Jesus, including, at times, comfort. There are myriad things in our world that catch our attention, and, in my experience, when my heart is touched, and I care, then I need to get involved, to speak up as a Christian... Regardless of the

cost. Paul from a jail cell to young Timothy, saying, essentially, that faith inevitably coaxes us all into moments of conflict. “Be brave, Timothy,” of course I’m paraphrasing Paul here. “Remember the gift, the legacy of faith, that your Mother & Grandmother have given you. They too cared, and they were brave. Now you carry the torch.”

Now, my friends at St Andrew’s, WE carry the torch.

Several times I have been in church communities where one of the parishioners was very politically active. They speak up about their convictions, and I tell you not a lie, you can hear groans from some. Church becomes like a family at the supper table, you may know the type of situation, where a family member, as predictable as the sun rising in the morning, they do not hold back on a particular topic – with honesty and personal conviction, we know that they truly believe in this. Difficult in times of conflict is loving one another, isn’t it? Some of us can see that person in our lives who is passionate about their cause, and you know what? As that rather vocal Christian speaks up, again and again, some people get on board! Some even contribute financially or offer support. A cynic might say it is to shut the person up, but I think we all know that sometimes God’s Spirit is like this – working, over and over, breaking down our walls of resistance.

Jesus as described by the Gospels, and his followers like Paul, they were tenacious, and certainly grating to those in power. Our Ancestors of Faith – Paul, Jesus and all the followers – they called us to see that we are interconnected to a community far greater than our circles. Different cultures, different experiences, different customs, but all part of what we call the Body of Christ. Today as we participate in Communion on this World Communion Sunday, I invite you to be mindful of two communities across the sea. These are only two of countless communities in our world who are facing persecution, deep loss, even death, daily.



The Kourieh family - Syrian Christians who fled from home to Lebanon take communion in Beirut. ~ Kate Brooks Washington Post

Only a few years ago, the Kourieh family enjoyed Mass at their Syrian village church. Neighbours would visit one another in homes, children played in the streets of Syria.

Then the Islamic State and other extremists started kidnapping Christians like the Kouriehs. The relentless violence and civil war broke out, tearing Syria apart. The Kouriehs had to flee for their lives, to Lebanon. In this picture, a member of the Kourieh family takes communion in Mar Yacoub Church in Beirut. In 2018, the Lebanese government reported that they offer sanctuary to 1.5 million Syrians, this in a country that has a population of barely 4 million!¹ The Kouriehs, and you and I, are connected in World Communion.



Communion in Cremisan, West Bank.

Finally, one more story of connection. For years now, in sunshine, rain and even snow, Father Shomali, a local Catholic priest, in the West Bank, Palestine has led a weekly mass as a form of non-violent witness against the Israeli separation barrier that threatens to divide the Cremisan monastery, as well as olive groves, from the rest of the Beit Jala community. Father Shomali made this statement during a vigil:

What do we do? We pray because we believe in God and we believe that one day [God] will hear our prayer and ...will give us justice.²

Now, some of you know that Palestine and Israel are particularly close to my heart. The United Nations reports that there are approximately five million Palestinian refugees living in exile around the world.³ In Bethlehem where I lived, Christians tenaciously carry the torch. Church steeples dominate the landscape, dotted with Mosque minarets.

People of all faith, connected to that land, their rich legacy, they worship in the sights of Israeli guns. Many are arrested by Israeli authorities for peacefully serving and receiving Communion on land that the world community declares is theirs. Olive trees that very possibly Jesus rested against as he rested in his travels.

What an amazing legacy we celebrate today around the world. World Communion – Joy and Brokenness. Christ presence binds us, deeply. Let's think of that as we share in Communion today. Amen.

¹ Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/lebanon>

² <https://972mag.com/photos-in-fight-against-the-wall-does-cremisan-have-a-prayer/86495/>

³ <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>