

# “Celebrating Being a Member of God’s Diverse Family”

Romans 14:1-23 & 1 Corinthians 13:1-7

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Last week I went hiking at the Wilderness Fellowship Camp near Frederic, Wisconsin. The variety of foliage is spectacular. In the distance I could see corn, soybeans and alfalfa. Beside a pond was majestic willow trees. Underfoot were clovers and a variety of grasses. Beside the trail were blueberries. Occasionally I would spy a wild strawberry that was preparing for a winter sleep with its leaves a yellowish-orange. In the woods most of the trees were green soaking up a few more days of solar energy; yet, the sumac was already vibrant red, the birch were soft yellow. Occasionally, a maple was dressed in vibrant orange. Each tree was different. There were maples, birch, oak, poplar, and others. They had different leaves, bark, and structure. Even the trees that belonged to the same species were each unique: different height, different array of branches, different bends. The forest floor was covered with a variety of vegetation. My favorite are the ferns. A swampy area had a variety of grasses and a few cattails. All this variety God created good. If one could travel the world, they would see a profusion of plants the dense foliage of the rainforests, towering redwoods, pines hanging on to mountains. Even in extreme conditions such as deserts and the arctic there are plants. It seems God enjoys variety. We worship a big God of infinite creativity.

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. Some will call it “The Eucharist” which means give thanks. Some will call it “Communion” focusing on one’s relationship with God and one another. Others will call it the “Agape meal”, the Greek word for supreme sacrificial love. Others will call it the “love feast”. Others “The Table of the Lord”. Others “The Great Thanksgiving”. Others “The Lord’s Supper”.

There is even more variety in the way we celebrate. Different ways to come to the table, different kinds of bread and juice. Different understanding of what we are doing and what is happening in this meal. Different people leading the worship and serving the elements: members, pastors, priests, bishops, elders, ministers, deacons, reverends, and padres.

Some will come forward to receive the bread, dip it in the cup, and partake. Others will receive a wafer then drink from a common cup. Others will be served where they are seated. Still others may do these things as a part of a full meal - seated at a table in a sanctuary or a home or a school building or hut or a clearing in the jungle. Others may form a circle sitting on the floor at a retreat or in the woods, or a rock, or on the sand.

Some will use juice. Others wine. Others a different beverage. Some will use bread: it could be gluten free, Hawaiian, unleavened, sourdough, wheat, white or rye. Some will use a staple part of the meal from their community rice, plantains or potatoes.

Some will say precise words over the bread and juice that have been passed down in their tradition for generation; then, they will regard the elements to be holy providing nourishment from God. Others will use a variety of words viewing the elements as symbols that reveal a deeper, mysterious blessing. Others believe the elements open one to the nourishment of the Holy Spirit.

There are numerous differences. Some of the differences are profound. Some will think that their way of celebrating communion is the only proper way to do it, so they will restrict access to members of their denomination in good standing. Some will welcome only those who have made a public profession of their faith. Some will welcome only adults. Some celebrate God’s grace welcoming all ages and all people to the sacrament.

It seems God enjoys variety. Perhaps God smiles when God sees each person, each church, each denomination, maybe even each religion being true to the unique way God created them by worshiping God in the manner that is most meaningful to them.

Tex Sample wrote, “What is common in community is not shared values or common understanding so much as the fact that members of a community are engaged in the same argument... in which alternative strategies, misunderstandings, conflicting goals and values are thrashed out.”

World Wide Communion Sunday abounds with differences; yet, it is a worldwide community celebration because all of us are engaged in the same argument regarding how to worship God. We are united not on the details rather our love for God and each other.

The Apostle Paul's letters abound in discussions regarding the differences of opinions in the church. It seems Paul had a similar perspective that our arguments should not divide us, instead our passion to worship God unites us as we argue about how best to worship. We are to build each other up and live in harmony, yet each person is to follow their unique individual convictions. Paul talks about whether or not to follow Jewish traditions, celebrate Holy Days, and eat meat that had been purchased in the market place which generally came from the animal sacrifices that were offered at various pagan temples. Paul wrote, **Romans 14:1-23 NLT** **“Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it's all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall. And with the Lord's help, they will stand and receive God's approval. In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable. Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor God. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God. For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. If we live, it's to honor the Lord. And if we die, it's to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and rose again for this very purpose—to be Lord both of the living and of the dead. So why do you condemn another believer? Why do you look down on another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For the Scriptures say, “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will declare allegiance to God.’” Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God. So let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall. I know and am convinced on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong. And if another believer is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. Then you will not be criticized for doing something you believe is good. For the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of living a life of goodness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you, too. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church and try to build each other up. Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong to eat something if it makes another person stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another believer to stumble. You may believe there's nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who don't feel guilty for doing something they have decided is right. But if you have doubts about whether or not you should eat something, you are sinning if you go ahead and do it. For you are not following your convictions. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.”**

What is God trying to tell us through the variety of nature, people, and perspectives? What is God trying to tell us through the Apostle Paul? Is God communicating that there are many right ways to do and be and live and worship? That are all equally good and pleasing to God. Could it be that the right way for me to live is different than your right way, because God made each of us different and we have different experiences? Could two people have a very different view on how to live to the glory of God with both of them being right, because they honor the way God created them?

A loving family sits down to enjoy Thanksgiving dinner. Each person takes different amounts of each food being served; yet, all of them enjoy a delicious feast and the love of family.

What do you think about the concept that what makes community is being engaged in the same argument and not shared values and common understanding? Clearly in politics there is a lot of arguing; yet, the fact that people are engaged, that each person believes they have a way to make the country better makes community and gives us hope for a bright future. On a world wide scale there are a variety of lifestyles,

governments, and ways of doing things yet most of it can be grouped into a few argument categories. How about religions at the core does every religion teach to worship God and become a more loving person? Despite our dividing perspective these common arguments unite us.

Our arguments would be more productive and enlightening if everyone followed a few rules. Listen to another's perspective with an open mind. Try to put yourself in their shoes, imagine their circumstances and background. Never call the person on the other side a disrespectful name. Never hate. Resist the urge to assume their motive, exaggerate their position, or make assumptions. Start by looking at the big picture. Is there a common outcome both of you desire? Often it is helpful to ask, "What is your desired outcome?" Avoid "you" statements. Own your perspective using I statements.

Saying "I enjoy cookie dough without chocolate chips" is better than saying "You are a fool if you do not eat cookie dough." In a loving way you might point out that eating cookie dough made with raw eggs is potentially dangerous. That is much better than saying, "You idiot you are going to die from eating cookie dough". I am aware of the risk however the delicious taste is worth the risk to me personally even though it is not for others. We could have a robust argument over cookie dough; yet, at the core would probably be our desire to enjoy a delicious treat.

The Apostle Paul wrote, **1 Corinthians 13:1-7 MSG "If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy but don't love, I'm nothing but the creaking of a rusty gate. If I speak God's Word with power, revealing all God's mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if I have faith that says to a mountain, "Jump," and it jumps, but I don't love, I'm nothing. If I give everything I own to the poor and even go to the stake to be burned as a martyr, but I don't love, I've gotten nowhere. So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I do, I'm bankrupt without love. Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love does not want what it does not have.**

**Love does not strut, Love does not have a swelled head, Love does not force itself on others, Love is not always "me first," Love does not fly off the handle, Love does not keep score of the sins of others, Love does not party when others struggle. Love takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, Love puts up with anything, Love trusts God always, Love always looks for the best, Love never looks back, Love keeps going to the end."**

You can know all the facts. You can know all about worship, religions, the issue, politics, and trees but without love all of that knowledge is useless. What does that mean for you as you partake of the bread and juice on this World Communion Sunday? Does it mean that from your perspective you can do everything right in your life, in worship yet if you do not love God, love yourself and love others then the abundantly life and joy God desires for you will be elusive? Do we need to let go of our tightly held opinions enough to love everyone? Do we need to be engaged in arguments to create worldwide community?

Jim Holle shared a devotion at our last session meeting that inspires him. "When I was a boy we lived 4 miles from town and most of my friends. As a result I ended up playing by myself a lot. I didn't mind the solitude, however. I enjoyed riding my bike for hours, swimming in the river and taking long walks in the woods. It felt good being alone with my own thoughts and my own imagination. Sometimes I even pondered a few of the big questions we all have. I would think, "What is this world all about?", "What is the meaning of Life?" and "Why are we here?" I never could think of a good answer, though and soon went back to playing again. It took me many years and a lot of searching to find the answer I was seeking and when I did it was so simple that I almost didn't believe it. The answer is LOVE. It always has been and it always will be. The rest is just details. God loves us all so much and God put us here to love as well. We are here to choose love. We are here to share love. We are here to learn of love. We are here to grow in love. We are here to pray for love. We are here to delight in love. We are here to become one with God's love. We are here to complete our missions in love and to help others to complete theirs. We are here to fill ourselves full to overflowing with the love that created and maintains the universe. We are here to love God. We are here to love ourselves. We are here to love everyone as ourselves. We are here to find our own special ways of sharing all the love that is within us. It is our gift to God and our answer to life. And even if we haven't done the best job of it up until now, each new day gives us another chance. When the big questions of life leave you lost then, don't give up. Just love. The answers will come to you, if not in this life then in the next. Always remember that "God is love" and that when you love you will grow closer to God, Heaven and your true self."

Let us celebrate worldwide Communion with love for God, love for one another, love for our self and love for every person around the world. Amen