

[Transcript] – Sermon by Irma Fast-Dueck, September 30, 2018

Thank you for letting me join you these days for engaging sometimes very quirky activities and exercises with me.

We had a good conversation yesterday and a rich conversation this morning of wrestling with communion and I'm just reminded how much of what we loved when we were part of this community 18 to 20 years ago. It was this community's ability to wrestle with great integrity and honesty with each other and still love each other with such grace. And it was it's been lovely. I've been talking about communion all weekend. (You have to forgive my voice but it's I'm feeling fine but my voice is kind of saying I think I'm almost done but I'm going to push it through.)

I said yesterday and this morning, that I think, it's sort of odd for me to talk about communion because most of my research – where I'm spending my time as an academic – is in the area of baptism and it's really strange that I'm working so much with baptism because I really don't like water. In fact I'm petrified of water. I don't mind drinking water. I appreciate its value in washing but I don't like swimming in it. And particularly it drives me crazy that most of the way that the New Testament talks about baptism is drowning and that doesn't help me at all.

And for someone who's scared of water in the first place I've not enjoyed wrestling with this image of drowning in water. But if he knew me, and a number of you do, you'd know that I love. I love food, all kinds of food. And you'd think because I love food I'd be all over research on communion. And what's more as I was sitting back talking with my husband about our memories of our time TUMC. What do I remember? The food experiences! I remember meat marinated in beer at Tim and Jackie's I remember a traditional Mennonite *faspa* at the Penner's. I remember gorgeous muffins that Sharon and Ed's I remember homemade bread and borscht and apples and Gary and Lydia's. And perhaps my favourite memory is the Good Friday service when we would gather here and we ate fish food not fish food, food with fish in it. [Suddenly I had this image in my head which was not where I wanted to go.] And we gathered in the sanctuary we made these dishes that were all they had food and fish in them right?

And and then we followed that with a communion service on Good Friday. And it was a rich memory. And I brought a friend who'd never been to a Mennonite church before knew very little about Mennonites and I brought her. And that changed everything for her that experience and she promptly became a Mennonite.

I said yesterday that one of the beautiful things about communion, and baptism is the same for that matter, is how ordinary things become extraordinary. We have at the front these images: this image of a

banquet table. We know this image at weddings or big parties or festivities. We recognize it but this incredible image of beauty and joy and celebration. And on this side I don't know if you can see it. I think the communion table is covering it. There's like a picnic blanket and the idea of people sitting together on a hill sharing on bread and fish perhaps and as they did in the feeding of the 5000. Or maybe that's our church picnic or who knows. But all of these things are somehow connected to this thing we have we call communion, that there's something very ordinary and familiar which gets used to bring us into something quite extraordinary. And our communion services look back to a whole cluster of time-bound specific events that were Jesus's many meals with his friends with the poor with the rich with the women and men with crowds of people eating bread and fish with baskets leftover. And of course our communion meal evokes a very particular memory of a Passover meal in an upper room with his disciples.

And we think about this meal as being this amazingly holy sacred meal and yet at its core it was probably a meal that was just like the meals we are familiar with. We've done many times together: some Passover foods a little wine, disciples, maybe one of them leaning back on Jesus because he's eaten too much. And the conversation, as sometimes happens at meals, become sometimes quite focused and intense. It was a meal that was ordinary but extraordinary at the same time. For this reason we read or told as Michele did so beautifully, not the typical communion text, we'll get to that one yet, but the story of Zaccheus. I love that story. Jesus arrives in Jericho and Zaccheus that tax collector hears about Jesus coming and ends up at the back of the crowd and is desperate to get a look at this guy Jesus and so he does what any of us would do. Well, the more fit of us would do in a similar situation, he climbs a tree and he hopes that nobody will notice. And of course Jesus always seems to notice things and these kinds of things.

And he stops by the tree he looks right up at the chaos along with probably a thousand other sets of eyes going and you can imagine the chaos up there perched precariously on a branch turning maybe beet red because of all the attention now that suddenly on this guy and Jesus without missing a beat says to Zaccheus. "So aren't you going to invite me to your home?" I can just hear that collective gasp of the crowd that was going on as Jesus asks to be asked home for dinner. And because Jesus has just invited Zaccheus to invite him the conversation goes on and it ends up with "today salvation has come to your house" "today salvation has come to your house," I love this.

Here is this wonderful little alternation in the Gospels between Jesus giving hospitality and Jesus receiving hospitality. And I think at the core what's going on here is what goes on in communion every time we engage it. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Like all rituals that we repeat again and again we sometimes lose the meaning of the ritual. A few years ago I read a wee book by the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams who wrote this little book called *Being Christian*. He tries to explain to ordinary folk -- but thoughtful ordinary folk -- about what's going on in the root practices of the Christian life; practices of baptism, of Eucharist, of reading the bible and of prayer. In as clear a way of possible he's trying to explain what these practices are all about. And I was drawn to him. He's not trying to explain this to Anglicans or Church of England types or to Catholics or anything. He's trying to talk about these things in a way that all Christians might understand. I'm going to pull up four words that he says and see if this can help us think about what communion might mean for us.

So the first word, **welcome**. At its simplest form, for Christians to share in communion, means to know that we are always guests; that we are people who have been welcomed but more than that, we are wanted. Perhaps it's the simplest thing that we can say about communion and yet it's supremely worth saying: in communion, at its simplest form Jesus says he wants our company, he wants us to be with him. And I don't know about you but sometimes when I read the Gospels I get the feeling that whenever you hear a raucous party going on and loud noise and singing and laughter that Jesus is probably in the vicinity. Maybe that's my active of imagination; that Jesus had this way of creating community around him.

And my sense is that Jesus is choice of company his gregarious relating to all kinds of folks --Zaccheus included -- must've driven some of his friends and his disciples absolutely crazy. At least that's my reading of the gospel. I can only think that Jesus's indiscriminate generosity and his willingness to mix with the deplorables, the unwanted, the untouchables, the undesirables, the unlikables, must have driven the gospel writers crazy because they had to write this down and admit that this was going on -- or scratch it down on a scroll or however they were writing. As much as I'm sure they would have liked to, they couldn't deny or suppress this reality of Jesus. It was too sharp in Jesus's memory that they had to write it down. That Jesus was always out looking for company and all sorts of company and sometimes his presence had a way of binding people together.

Well, we are guests of Jesus and we are there not because of anything we've done. We are guests not because we've achieved our right to be guests by our knowledge or by our understanding of right living or by our right understanding of the Anabaptist Mennonite Confession of faith. We are at the table because Jesus invites us as his guests and we are there because Jesus asks us to be there and because Jesus wants our company.

But let's get back to the Zaccheus story for a minute and communion. One of the things that catches me about this story is that by Jesus's welcome he makes others, he makes us capable of welcoming. Get it? Jesus welcomes Zaccheus. He recognizes him. He acknowledges him. He says he wants to be in relationship with him and through Jesus. welcoming of us we too are free to invite Jesus into our lives and to literally receive him through the bread and wine into our bodies our very life. His welcome of us gives us courage to open up to him, to receive him as guest in our lives and to receive others as guests in our lives.

And it's this flowing of giving and receiving of welcome and acceptance: We are welcomed and we welcome. It's the beautiful thing about communion. We invite Jesus' presence but we are only able to do so because Jesus first calls us. And his way of welcoming Zaccheus and his way of welcoming us is to say "aren't you going to ask me to your home?"

This giving and receiving is not kind of a side message of Jesus. We know this when we look at the other texts that there are around it, this it's not a "by the way" kind of conversation that Jesus has but it's at the heart of the gospel message. God gives, we receive. We give, because we've received. We welcome, because we have been welcomed. The message of Jesus, the message of love, of forgiveness, of grace is a message rooted in giving and receiving and it is the message of the cross and it is the message of the resurrection. God's giving and our receiving and in our receiving we are unable to give to offer love forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation, it's salvation come to our house.

The first word **welcome**, the second word for communion **thanksgiving**. The Gospel of Luke tells the story of The Last Supper when Jesus and the disciples sit down for the Passover meal and as Jesus meets with his friends for that Last Supper and he tells them to see the broken bread and the wine poured out as his body and his blood which are about to be broken and poured out into crucifixion.

And he says in effect at the meal, he says, "what is going to happen to me the suffering and death I'm about to endure the tearing of my flesh the shedding of my blood is to be the final and definitive sign of God's welcome and God's mercy." And instead of being this ultimate sign of tragedy and disaster it becomes an open door to the welcome of the Father. And this is in a sense what he's saying in the upper room on Maundy Thursday and that is what he says every time we celebrate communion in commemoration of his death, in affirmation of his resurrection, in expectation of his coming again.

And if we think of the Lord's Supper as simply a somber and shadowed occasion as sort of a dark sort of time we forget what Jesus does actually at that point. He points to the mystery of the cross. He points to the cross and the resurrection. He points to a new future. In essence he makes himself a sign and he

says his death, his death, the reality of his death is a door into hope and it's a door into a new future. And what does Jesus do in the shadow of his death? He gives thanks. He gives thanks. He connects his experience with the reality of who God is. And that is what thanksgiving in essence always does. When we say thank you to God we connect our own experience with God. And so, when Jesus gives thanks at that moment before the breaking and the bread before the wounds and the blood it's as if this it's as if he is if he's connecting the darkest part of human experience death and suffering to God. Because in the darkest places of life God continues to give: to give life, to give hope to give resurrection. And we know this from the very beginning of the very first creation story, that God creates life, out of absolute nothingness God creates. And we know this that the death of Jesus where God out of total darkness out of total emptiness God gives life. And so we give thanks. And that is why the Greek word *Eucharista* literally means Thanksgiving.

This is one of the most perhaps significant gifts and understandings of communion: that it's about thanksgiving. But not a glib thanksgiving, a thanksgiving that is actually rooted in the darkness of human life.

Word number three **penitence** or **confession** depending on what you choose.

I mentioned before how often there's this element of the somber in communion services that we can never avoid. And it's not surprising because we know that a key aspect of the story of the last supper in the New Testament are those words "on the night he was betrayed." As I said earlier we are at the table because we are God's guests and because God loves to have us there and that Jesus has requested the pleasure of our company. But we are also there because we have the capacity to betray. "The hand of the one who betrays me is at the table with me," says Jesus. And he dips the bread and the wine and he passes it to Judas. But then he warns all those around the table that in a couple of hours time -- and we forget this -- that they too are going to abandon him.

And of course they all do. They all do. And this too is part of what is going on in Communion a part we'd rather not acknowledge. Communion reminds us of the need for honesty. The need for honest repentance, of the need to confront our capacity to betray and forget the gift that we have been given in Christ. And this is why I will say and I said yesterday, Communion is not in Christian practice a reward for good behaviour, which we have sometimes thought it to be. It is the food I need to prevent myself from starving as a result of my own self-deception, my own self-absorption, my pride and my forgetfulness. Anabaptist Mennonites knew this when they embraced this tradition of putting things right before they go to the communion table.

But unfortunately, some of us who come out of that and Anabaptist tradition have come with this assumption that thereby communion is only for the “holy” and the “good” and the “perfect” people. And while putting things right with our neighbors is significant and important because it clears away those blocks that prevent us from perceiving God in our lives and receiving the goodness in the gospel message that we are meant to hear, it gets in the way -- and I totally get how putting things right helps to clear that up. We need to remember that communion is not a reward. It is not a reward for good behaviour. The communion table is not an awards banquet for all the people who have succeeded and done well.

In the words of Rowan Williams “We take communion not because we are doing well but because we are doing badly. We take communion not because we have arrived but because we're traveling. We take communion not because we are right but because we are often confused and wrong. We take communion not because we are divine but because we are human. We take communion not because we are full we take it because we're hungry.” Communion, remember, is first of all a gift, a gift given to us through Jesus.

The last word, you saw it coming: **community** or the **church**.

As I've already said the thing about Jesus is that he had this penchant for creating community. Actually he reminds me of my mother who had this compulsion to always create community out of a motley group of people, although she wouldn't have necessarily invited herself over for dinner as Jesus did. But that's a sideline. Jesus had this distinct way of seeking out people and gathering them in together. And perhaps this is not a surprise because God is from the very beginning a social God. God seeks out people, seeks out community and the story of God is really the story about a people together.

The thing about communion, what the great poets and thinkers have always recognized, is that communion at its very core represents at its heart the very character of who God is. It is the imagination of God laid out on a table. It is the revelation of God's final act that eschatological feast at the banquet that is there and God's final purposes. Rowan Williams says that “when we gather as God's guests at God's table the church becomes what it is meant to be: a community of strangers who have become guests together and are listening together to the invitation of God.”

This is what God calls desires yearns for us to be what we are together at the community table is this vision of what this banquet will be at the end of time when all will come together. We have a little appetizer here. I love the thing about the wine and the blood being Christ wine and blood. Suddenly when we drink wine -- which is blood, it's a bit gross when we think about it but bear with me -- when

we drink the blood suddenly we become each other's brothers and sisters. Suddenly we are connected to each other through blood not the DNA hereditary blood. But we are bound by blood by sharing the same bloodline, by the same blood connection.

We have Christ's blood running through us and making us one: one body, one cup, one Christ ,one holy community who is holy not because of what we've done, but because of what Christ has done and is doing. And the pledge of love given to us by Christ demonstrated by his death and resurrection is the pledge of love we now extend to each other. We're unified not because we agree on all these same all the same things, but we are now unified because of the gift of Christ to us his body indeed. That is a reason to give thanks. Amen.