

Communion: Work in Progress

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

World Communion Sunday
October 4, 2015

“I hear that there are divisions among you. . . .” -- 1 Corinthians 11:18

Last Saturday, I stopped in at St. Gregory of Narek Church across Richmond Road for one of those magnificent meals of Armenian food that the folks there serve during their annual festival. I know a number of you went over as well as some point during weekend, and I learned from Fr. Hratch that the turnout for this year's festival was so good they ran out of food more than once and had to dispatch urgent convoys to Costco to re-supply on the fly.

I had a wonderful lunch of eggplant salad, pork kebab, rice pilaf, and those wonderful Armenian green beans that I still haven't been able to reproduce at home. And for dessert I chose savory over sweet and had one of those delicious Armenian pizza-like flatbreads called lahmahjoon, which I had to eat on the run since I was late for a meeting here with Dave Vesey.

And this past Thursday I was back at St. Gregory's for our monthly Hillcrest Clergy lunch, which Fr. Hratch hosted, and for which he personally did all the cooking: baked salmon, mashed red potatoes with buttermilk and sauteed onions, cole slaw with kale and Compari tomatoes, warm flatbread, and flaky apply turnovers. As my area colleagues and I arrived at the church hall, we gravitated to the kitchen where Hratch was cooking, and asked if we could help. He had everything under control, and invited us to get something to drink and keep him company, which we were more than happy to do. That's usually what I ask folks to do when I'm the one at the stove: keep me company while I finish up here.

The real fellowship at such meals, I'm convinced, happens there, in the kitchen, with people giving of themselves on both sides of the island. When it comes time to serve, that's usually when people can help: the plates are in the third door to the right, the cutlery is in those three drawers, napkins are in the pantry, and the glasses are above the sink. And while I and Hratch and countless other cooks platter the food, the glasses are filled, the table is laid, and the meal is served, opened with a prayer of genuine thanksgiving.

How many times have you and I played out that scenario at St. Gregory's or here at Faith or somewhere else? There's a warmth in those kitchens, and it's not just from the heat of the stove. The cook wants you there as long as you're not in the way, and you want to be there to see and smell and maybe even taste for seasoning. Such meals are joint efforts, lovingly assembled, even if that word is never spoken. People get to know one another in those settings – who offers to help, who doesn't, who knows how to stir a pot, who doesn't, who knows how to wipe down a counter and who doesn't. You learn who you can count on in those settings, and even if you can't count on the help, you feed them anyway because they're guests. Communion means something in those kinds of kitchens – it's tangible and productive and real.

Those were some of my thoughts as I left Hratch at the tail end of the clean-up in the kitchen – the dishwasher was running, the tables and counters were wiped down, the

leftovers had been given away – and I was both spiritually warmed and saddened at the same time, because I thought about that other meal that is at the heart of the Christian faith – the one for which we ordinarily reserve the word Communion – and Paul's words to the Corinthians that constitute this morning's text came to me, "I hear that there are divisions among you."

There certainly are, I thought, as I pulled out of St. Greg's freshly paved driveway. There are divisions among us when it comes to Communion, and apparently there always have been. We've put Communion at the center of our worshiping lives and we're still working at trying to get it right.

As welcomed as all of us have been at meals in the Social Hall at St. Gregory of Narek Apostolic Armenian Church, none of us would be welcomed at Communion in the sanctuary there. We are not part of the apostolic tradition they recognize, and only members of that communion are welcome at the Lord's table they prepare for worship, and that's a great sadness to me. Religion forces us to share secular meals only; shared sacred meals are still off-limits.

It also saddens me that I can't receive Communion from my friend Fr. John Thomas Lane, who pastors St. Paschal's Roman Catholic Church in Highland Heights. I also couldn't receive Communion from my friend Christopher Otten when he was the pastor of Our Savior Lutheran Church over on SOM Center Road because that church is part of the Missouri Synod.

All of these churches and many others, keep alive the reality Paul lamented to the Corinthians: "I hear that there are divisions among you." I wonder what Paul would say to our divided churches today, on this World Communion Sunday?

A few years ago, one of the Communion stewards at St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh said to me, as we were about to go into a service, "I think we were farther ahead, in some ways, in 1975 than we are now," and that was in 2002. As far as Communion is concerned, I would agree.

In 1975 and even in 1985, I regularly received Communion when I accompanied my Roman Catholic friends to their churches and they received Communion when they came to church with me. Communion wasn't used in those days to separate the sheep from the goats, as it is today and so often has been used in the Christian past. None of the priests that I knew seemed concerned that a Protestant or a Catholic who hadn't made a proper confession would desecrate the sacrament by receiving it unworthily.

I think those priests may have understood a bit better than we do now what Paul meant when he warned the Corinthian Christians not to partake of the Eucharist in an unworthy manner. If you actually read the passage in which that warning occurs, as we have this morning, it's pretty clear that Paul was talking about selfishness and thoughtlessness, not about which Christian tradition you'd come from or which Christian label you were wearing at the moment.

And Paul certainly did not have transubstantiation in mind when he urged us to make sure that we can discern the body of Christ whenever we partake of the Lord's Supper, for we truly are in the real presence of Christ when we partake of that meal – the presence of self-giving love to the point of a broken body and shed blood for us and for all creation. The real presence of the body of Christ is not doctrine and it's not, as Donald Trump put it with the theological sophistication of a politician, a little wine and a little cracker. The real presence of the body of Christ is love: boundless, eternal, self-sacrificial love, and nothing more and nothing less.

If you want to see that body, look around you. Look at the women and men and girls and boys who make up this body of Christ, this church, this company of faithful people trying to get Communion and everything else Christian right. Look at their faces

and look on their hearts, as God does. Look at the way they walk and how the burdens they bear affected that walk as they entered our front doors. Look at what they've done with their lives and look at their unrealized potential. Look at their decision to be here this morning and to make themselves part of you. Look at them with gratitude and mercy, as Jesus looked on all of us from the cross and as God looks on all of us from heaven, and then you might begin to discern the body of Christ.

And then, maybe – just maybe – we'll begin to recover some of the spiritual ground church has lost since 1975.