

Rev. Dr. Gary Shahinian  
Sermon  
September 8, 2013  
Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

“We Are Among the Communion of Saints”

Scripture Text: 1 Corinthians 11:23-32

Dear people of God, are you aware that something special happens during Holy Communion? I’m not talking about the hocus pocus of the bread and wine being magically transformed into Jesus’s body and blood. I’m talking about a change that happens to each one of us when we participate together in this solemn rite of the church.

This meal is often called the Lord’s Supper. Jesus Christ is the host of this meal and he’s the one who invites the guests. Jesus is the one who initiated this meal. He brought it into being. It was during the night before the crucifixion, what Christians today call Maundy Thursday, in the upper room that Jesus first instituted this sacred meal. He and the disciples were celebrating the Passover feast, commemorating God’s deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. Jesus took the bread and the wine, and said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” Jesus was clearly forming a continuity between the Jewish Passover and his own

mission, which would be a deliverance from slavery to all the forces that prevent us from seeking God's presence in our lives. The name, the Lord's Supper, underscores the fact that the meal was not the creation of any church. It was not concocted by any church bishop or council or denomination. Rather Christ is the one who inaugurated it, and did so for every person who confesses his name. Christ conceived the meal, and is the only one who can offer the invitation to it.

In referring to the meal as the Lord's Supper, we are stressing its symbolic character. We highlight the words of Jesus, "Do this in remembrance of me." These words are the key in our understanding of the supper. Jesus set this meal apart as a visual and palpable aid to our memory to remind us exactly what the heart of the gospel is all about, that Christ lived and died for our sake. The meal is a symbol, a signpost, something that prods our imagination, and causes us to think of another reality. The bread symbolizes Christ's body broken on the cross. The cup symbolizes Christ's blood shed on the cross. They are symbols that signify Christ's willingness to die in order to show us a new way to live. Through Christ's infinitely meritorious sacrifice on the cross, we know that God has accepted us, even though in ourselves we are unacceptable. God

meets us just as we are, promises to forgive our sins, and imparts to us grace so that we may lead lives pleasing to him.

We also refer to this sacred meal as Holy Communion. That's probably the name with which we are most familiar. Communion means "to experience another" or "to have a close union with another." For example, when we commune with nature, we experience being at one with God's creation. When we commune with another person, we experience unity with that person. Such unity may be friendship, or it may involve a deeper, intimate unity, which is experienced by married persons. The meal instituted by Christ is a means that he gave us to commune with God, to experience God in this deeper, more intimate way. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that where two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, he is present with them. The term, Holy Communion, emphasizes that Christ is really present among us, really communing with us when we partake of the sacred meal.

We also refer to this meal as a sacrament. The word *sacrament* means "oath of allegiance." Its original meaning referred to the oath that an ancient Roman soldier swore at the beginning of his military service. The soldier would swear to serve the emperor unto death. Periodically

throughout his career, the soldier would be asked to renew his sacrament, his oath of allegiance, his pledge of loyalty.

Some of you have renewed your marriage vows. Although you and your partner made promises to each other at the beginning of your marriage, sometimes those promises through the years are broken or forgotten. It's a very good idea for couples to renew their wedding vows. It could be done in a chapel like this or in a large sanctuary, like First Baptist has, in a formal ceremony in the presence of clergy, relatives, and friends, or it could be done more informally. But the important thing is that the original commitment to love each other is renewed.

In the same way when we participate in Holy Communion, we remember Christ's sacrament to us. He pledged his loyalty to us unto death. He pledged that he would perform whatever course of action necessary to reconcile us to God. Christ kept that pledge, even though it meant that he had to pay the ultimate price, the shameful and painful death of crucifixion. The experience of this meal reminds us of that pledge. It also involves the renewing of our own promises of commitment and love that we have made to God and to each other as a community of faith. We pledge our faithfulness to serve God in all that we do.

One of the most meaningful scenes of Holy Communion takes place at the end of the splendid film, *Places in the Heart*. The scene shows the reconciliation and interconnectedness among various characters in the story, some of whom are dead.

At the beginning of the film, Sheriff Spalding of the small Texas town of Waxahachie is having dinner with his wife and two children when it's interrupted by a phone call that a young black man, named Wylie, is drunk and causing a ruckus. When the sheriff leaves to take care of the disturbance, he takes some rolls and shoves them in his pockets. Wylie is swinging a bottle of wine, the cause of his drunkenness, right before he accidentally shoots and kills the sheriff. The bread and wine that we see here in the form of the rolls and the bottle are a bizarre foreshadowing of the mystical Holy Communion that the two of them will share at the end of the film as they share the elements with each other in the pew. After the shooting accident, Wylie is lynched by the local Ku Klux Klan. They too will be present in the Communion scene at the end. Do they deserve to be there? Christ is the one who invites us to his holy meal. He's the one who decides who should be there.

Now widowed and left with her two children, Edna Spalding, played

by Sally Field in an Academy Award-winning performance, must struggle to keep her family farm against all odds in Texas during the Great Depression of the 1930s. She realizes that in order to save her farm, she needs the help of a migrant black sharecropper who stole from her. The sharecropper, Moses, is really a good person who has had to endure the oppression of racism his entire life. He decides to help Edna harvest the cotton crop so that she can stay on the farm with her children. Edna and Moses commit themselves to helping each other for the same reasons we all commit ourselves to help each other: good people bring out the best in each other. When we come together in Holy Communion, we are renewing that commitment to each other.

The film doesn't offer an unrealistic ending where everyone lives happily ever after. Though the Spalding farm is able to cash in its cotton crop and win the grand prize for being the first cotton harvest of the season, it's still the middle of the Great Depression and who knows what is going to happen next year. The small Texas town of Waxahachie is full of those, like the schoolteacher, Viola, who drives off with her husband for better prospects elsewhere in the big city. And Moses, the migrant black sharecropper, without whom Edna could not have harvested the

cotton crop, walks off into the blackest of nights after being beaten by the local Klansmen. Yet he too in a mystical way will be present with the others partaking of Holy Communion at the end.

The ending, nevertheless, which we will see in the film clip, wraps up the movie very nicely in the warmth and hopes of a church scene where everyone is participating in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Not only are the individual persons present there, but the communal soul of the town of Waxahachie is being expressed in this scene. Inexpressible emotions find expression. The unfaithful can be forgiven. The homeless can find a home. The exiled can return. The oppressor and oppressed come together and pass the peace to each other. The murderer and victim can sit side by side and share bread and wine, with sins and tragedies put behind them.

This unforgettable Communion scene may be, perhaps, the best ever shown on film. It takes place in a small church. As the camera slowly pans the congregation receiving communion, we recognize all the characters, those living, those dead, and those departed for other places. It's an image in which the lambs and the wolves, the wronged and the wrongdoers, the betrayers and the betrayed, are all together as one.

The characters of *Places in the Heart* are ordinary people who struggle, as we all do, but are ultimately united in reconciliation and communion in the body and blood of Christ, as we all are.

Who are among those present in this mystical Communion scene? First we see a wife whose husband has committed adultery with her best friend. Up until this point, the wife has been totally alienated from him, yet here she reaches out to take his hand; a homeless woman who lost her life in a tornado is there; black persons and Klansmen are there taking Holy Communion together in this white Southern church; the nasty town banker and the unscrupulous cotton gin owner are there; a blind man is there; children are there receiving the sacrament; and finally we see Wylie, the young black man who was lynched, and the white Sheriff Spalding, whom Wylie accidentally killed, giving the peace to each other.

The communion of saints. A number so large the author of the Book of Revelation in his vision could not count all of them. We are among the communion of saints, the fellowship of believers bound together by Christ so strongly that when the church celebrates its family meal, all are present, the old, the middle-aged, and the young, men and women, all races, ethnic groups, and economic classes, the living and the dead. They



are all among the communion of saints. Amen.

[A three-minute clip from *Places in the Heart* is then shown]