

Sunday, September 2, 2012
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Today, we will finish our exploration of Paul's letters.

I thought, given that it is Communion Sunday, that it would make sense to take a look at Paul's writing about the Eucharist.

As we heard in the reading from Acts, the early church gathered to break bread together, as a way of remembering the sacrifice Christ had made for them.

Paul's reverence for communion is drawn directly from the teachings of Mark, Matthew and Luke – employing the same words of institution – attributed to Jesus at the last supper.

The reading is from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 11:17-26.

Sermon - "One Bread, One Body"

As things began to slow down a bit this past week, I was able to return to one of my favorite spiritual practices – sitting in the balcony in the late afternoon to meditate on the scripture for the week.

First, I walked around the meetinghouse, rereading the plagues and regaining the tremendous sense of Spirit that I feel in this space.

Jonathan Lee's plague reminded me that our faith community was first gathered in 1744 – 268 years ago.

I thought about the church community of that time and wondered what it was that bound them together and gave them the fortitude to survive and grow into the church we are today.

I wondered how they were different from the Corinthians to whom Paul wrote – or how they differed from us today.

Then I started thinking – not how they were different, but how we are similar.

I believe we share a common thread – one that binds us to one another – and that is our love of Christ.

I imagine there is this invisible thread that keeps us connected to those who came before us;

It is also a thread that can gently tug at us sometimes, a memory, a remembrance that we are not always certain of.

I like to imagine these early groups sharing communion – with the same words and ritual that we will use today.

There is a Greek word *Koinonia* that means communion by intimate participation.

The word is used frequently in the New Testament to describe the relationship within the early Christian church.

There is no specific translation in English for this beautiful word.

The essential meaning embraces concepts conveyed in the terms community, communion, joint participation, sharing and intimacy.

In the New American Standard Bible, *koinonia* is translated

twelve times as “fellowship;”

three times as “sharing;”

twice as “participation” and twice as “contribution.”

It is always used in reference to the deep relationship that exists when people acknowledge the power of shared experience.

The first usage of *koinonia* in the Greek New Testament is found just prior to today’s reading in Acts.

Verse 42’s translation says, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the communion, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

We heard that all the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.”

Communion itself was the breaking of bread and the form of worship and prayer.

It was in the breaking of the bread that the Apostles "recognized" Christ and it was in the breaking of bread, what we call Communion, that these early Christians celebrated Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection. They were gathered to remember in the manner which Christ instructed during the Last Supper when he said, "Do this in memory of me."

One author used these words: “To create a bond between comrades is the meaning of *koinonia* when people are recognized, share their joy and pains together, and are united because of their common experiences, interests and goals.”

This is why we gather together each week.

To acknowledge one another, to share joys and pains, to build a bond of Christian awareness.

To remember who and what came before us. To honor Christ’s sacrifice.

“Fellowship creates a mutual bond, which overrides each individual’s pride, vanity, and individualism, fulfilling the human yearning with fraternity, belonging, and companionship.”

The early Christian communities focused on sharing, not just their resources, but God’s grace as well.

They believed that community enhanced their relationship with God. Coming together to share joys and trials and communion, brought them closer to God.

Fellowship is never passive in the meaning of *koinonia*, it is always linked to action, not just being together, but also doing together.

With fellowship comes a close and intimate relationship embracing ideas, communication, and frankness, as in a true, blessed interdependent friendship among multiple group members.

I came upon another beautiful word in my reading this week in correspondence from the UCC Office of Global Ministries.

UBUNTU, pronounced oo-BOON-too, originates in the Bantu language of southern Africa and is an African philosophy and world view focused on people-to-people relationships. Desmond Tutu described it this way:

“One of the sayings in our country is Ubuntu – the essence of being human, “I am because you are.” Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can’t be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu- you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole World.”

When we come to the communion table, we come as one. One united body of Christ. Our bread symbolizes the unity – from many grains of wheat, one loaf is formed.

Later this month we will gather to define our vision for the future of our church.

Regardless of the words that we use we will attempt to give voice to the oneness that we share.

We can call it *koinoia*, *Ubuntu*, or *Communion*. It doesn’t matter.

What matters is that we acknowledge that God created us to be in union with one another, past and present.

We are the Body of Christ and for that, let us give thanks to God.