

Reflections on Holy Communion During COVID-19

“Communion in Exile”

Pastor Amy's Second Reflection - Offered on Sunday, December 13, 2020

This month we're taking this part of our worship service time to reflect upon Holy Communion during a pandemic. In our ELCA there are a wide range of communion practices taking place now: short outdoor services, drive-by services, online offerings. We're using individually wrapped packages of bread and wine and G-F bread and grape juice. We're needing to limit the numbers of people who can gather.

None of these practices allow us to experience the fullness of Holy Communion that happens when all are welcomed to Christ's table and there is room for everyone. The fullness of physical bodies gather together as the body of Christ to hear scripture and preaching, to receive from shared bread and cup, to pray and praise singing and speaking with one voice.

The pandemic is preventing the fullness of Holy Communion. For this reason, many are choosing to fast in this time. That is a good and faithful response. Those of us who are sharing in practices that depart from our full understanding of communion should do so with the awareness that these are practices we will use only during this time of exile amidst a pandemic.

Exile is a powerful metaphor for our time drawn from the witness of scripture. God's people lived in exile in Babylon after the oppressive Babylonian Empire destroyed Jerusalem and their temple. The people had to live with the weight of their own sin and the sin of others as they were cut off from all the ways they had come to understand God and themselves. We, too, are living with the weight of the collective sins of greed, short sightedness, rampant individualism, racism and disregard for the earth. We, too, are cut off from our normal patterns of worship. We are in exile.

Scholar Walter Bruggemann says that in Babylon, the people faced two temptations. One temptation was to assimilate to the ways of the dominant empire - to allow the dominant culture to define their identity and values, to seek luxury and ease among the wealth of the empire. Many chose this option. They remained in Babylon even after they were free to leave rather than facing the treacherous journey home through the wilderness. We could respond to our exile in a similar way, seeking our own luxury and ease. We could turn to Holy Communion seeking only comfort for ourselves.

The other temptation God's people faced in the Babylonian exile, one we face as well, is despair - concluding that God has failed and that we are hopeless. Those who gave into this temptation in Babylon did not have the courage for the difficult journey home.

But there is another option open to us, another response to exile. We can trust that God can and will make a new way through all the obstacles, that God can and will do a new thing. We can resist the power of Babylon that would define us or leave us hopeless and can follow God through the wilderness into a new future.

This is what the words of the prophet Isaiah, that we have been hearing throughout Advent, call us to do. As we enter into the wilderness, following God, we can trust that God does provide manna, nourishment, in the desert. Manna isn't the fullness of a meal, yet it is a gift God gives in wilderness times to help people move faithfully through the wilderness.

This is how I understand all the ways we are sharing communion in this time. These practices, including our Zoom communion today, are not the fullness of the gift of the sacrament. They are for this exile time only. Yet, I believe they can help us to resist the lure of assimilation and the power of despair to faithfully follow God into a new future. In truth, all forms of Holy Communion are just a foretaste of the feast to come when we will gather with all the saints at the heavenly banquet. That foretaste helps us to hunger and thirst for God's coming kingdom.

May this time of communion in exile and fasting nurture hunger within us, hunger that can help us to live more fully into care for all who hunger in these days.

Amen.