

# Places in the Heart

October 2, 2022

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Today, more people will celebrate Communion than on any other day of the year, as we celebrate World Communion Sunday. An initiative started at Shadyside Presbyterian church in 1933, World Communion Sunday is an attempt to remind Christians far and wide that what unites us is stronger than what divides us, a message that was powerful then, amidst the Great Depression and between the World Wars, and that is even more important now, as what divides us seems to be cracking the very foundation of human society.

And this is a special World Communion Sunday here at Union. After celebrating Communion with individual sealed packets since we returned to the sanctuary almost 18 months ago, Worship Ministry surveyed the congregation this summer regarding how you would like to receive Communion. Two thirds of respondents said they would like to return to passing trays with the bread and cup through the aisles as we had before the pandemic. And so, in true UCC fashion, because one third said they would prefer the packets, we will be offering both methods. People can continue to pick up Communion packets at the doors, and Communion trays will be passed through the pews.

Having been raised Roman Catholic, the first time I encountered passing Communion trays through the pews was in the 1984 movie “Places in the Heart.” Do you remember it? Since it’s almost 40 years old, I don’t think I need to offer a spoiler alert. Set in the south during the Great Depression, the plot is that a young African American man accidentally shoots the town sheriff, and then is brutally murdered in retaliation. The rest of the film follows Sally Field, the sheriff’s widow, through the trials of raising her children alone and struggling to keep the family farm as the bank threatens to foreclose.

Because it’s the south in the ‘30s and because her husband was killed by a young black man, there are racial overtones throughout the movie. The night of her husband’s funeral, a black drifter appears at her back door, offering to plant the cotton in her fields. She refuses his offer, but feeds him, shelters him for the night, and sends him on his way, but not before he steals some silver. In the following scenes, we watch the widow struggle with the banker’s blatant disregard for her and her children’s wellbeing and the rest of the men in her life giving her bad and self-serving advice. When the deputy sheriff returns the drifter to her house with the stolen silver, she has been so battered by her so-called support system that she makes up a story as to why he would have the silver, and takes the drifter into her home, taking him up on the offer to plant the fields, and maybe, just maybe, save the farm.

There’s plenty of drama that ensues, and I’d highly recommend giving it a watch, even if you’ve seen it before, if for nothing else than the final scene. Here, we see an iconic vision of a simple, southern church. There’s a choir singing, which gives way to a reading of 1 Corinthians 13. You know it – love is patient, love is kind, love is not arrogant or anxious or boastful or rude. Love does not want what it doesn’t have.

Throughout the whole movie, we've become painfully aware of all of the characters flaws. No one, not one of them, is perfect. So in some of the best theology ever to come out of Hollywood, amidst this church service we see the widow's face, we see her grasp the hand of the person next to her in the pew, and then it comes into focus that the hand that she's holding belongs to her dead husband. Then they start passing Communion through the pew, and the camera shows townspeople in the pews who were seen throughout the film, including people who have died and people who have fled. The widow passes a Communion tray to her dead husband, quietly saying "Peace of God." With the same blessing, he hands it to the young man who shot him and who had also been killed, and so on.

We could spend years unpacking this scene, but for our purposes this morning, let's lift up three themes.

- First, everyone – those who worked hard and played by the rules AND those who were deeply, deeply flawed – were included in this heavenly Communion. Everyone was part of the heavenly banquet.
- Second, and this is why this scene comes to mind for me this year, passing Communion through the pews really works best when there's someone to hand it to.
- The third theme draws from the first two: as each person serves the next one Communion, they pray, "Peace of God." In Communion, each person, the living and the dead, the deeply flawed and the marginally misguided, are essential parts of God's healing and wholeness, essential parts of God's peace, essential parts of God's redeeming of the world.

### **Our Scriptures**

As we gather to celebrate World Communion Sunday, I'm conscious that we need not only this message but also this practice of unity. We're all needed, we're all of value, even those who are wildly off base. This is a world in which God's message to the prophet Habakkuk, which was our first reading, couldn't be more relevant.

After Habakkuk rails at God:

"O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?" (1:2)

God tells Habakkuk:

"If it is slow in coming, wait. It's on its way. It will come." (2:3 from The Message)

Our world abounds with need that is slow in being met. When Habakkuk shakes his fist at God, he is lifting up both the strife of individuals and the discord of communities: God's message is not only to Habakkuk, not only to the destitute and the downtrodden, but to all who are weary, "If it is slow in coming, wait. It's on its way. It will come." (2:3 from The Message)

The Gospel passage that Christie read today begins with the disciples asking Jesus, "Lord, increase our faith," and Jesus responding, "If you had the faith of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

Have you ever tried it? I'm assuming that at least a few of you have at least some faith. Yet I doubt you've been able to do your landscaping through prayer alone. Whenever I hear this passage, it is tempting to envision a life of faith modeled on the mind tricks of Johnny Carson's "Amazing Carnac."

But our God is not a God of magic wands. Rather than an abracadabra faith that some imagine this passage to suggest, what Jesus actually tells the disciples is that YOU'VE already got all of the faith you need. With faith YOU can accomplish unimaginable things. This is a theme throughout Luke; you've already got all the faith you need. Put it to work.

If God is telling us in Habakkuk that change is coming, then Jesus is telling us with the mustard seed that by virtue of our faith, we are called to be agents of that change. A life of faith is one that seeks new possibilities, one that believes in Jesus' new covenant of forgiveness and restoration, one that honors the greater good.

### **Conclusion**

These scriptures dovetail with the Communion scene from "Places in the Heart." We consume the sacred, praying that somehow God will give us the courage, wisdom, creativity, and grace to be a part of the building of the reign of God, part of the healing of the world. We are commissioned to carry the sacred into our dealings with our neighbors, as we offer them God's wholeness and peace. We are commissioned to carry the sacred into the ballot box, as we build a society in which not only God's justice but also God's mercy and compassion rule the day. We are commissioned to carry the sacred to the streets and to the far corners of the world, that all may know that love is stronger than hate and a new way is possible.

Friends, as we serve one another Communion – both here and in every corner of the world today, both the righteous and those whose flaws are so glaring we would have never imagined them at the table of God's grace, let us pray for the courage to take up this commission, the commission to be agents of God's grace in the healing of the world.

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**Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Luke 17:5-10**  
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