

In Communion

Pentecost 13 (Proper 18C)

Written by Penny Duffy

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In today's Gospel, as in so many Gospel stories, Jesus is with a crowd of followers. He's talking, teaching, breaking bread, and *connecting*. He's not an oracle, high on a mountain, dispensing wisdom. He's right there on the ground in the messy mix of human life, interacting with the wealthy, the poor, the outcasts and the in-crowd. What he's talking about is relationship — our relationship with God and God in our relationships with one another. What he's building is community.

For Jesus, community was the opposite of tribalism, though sadly, tribalism became a feature of the institutional church. But before priests and hierarchy, before creeds and ritual, in the early church, *community* was everything. Folks gathered, often in secret. They remembered. They shared meals, they shared of themselves. When Jesus spoke about the bread and wine, saying, "Do this in remembrance of me," it wasn't the bread and wine, per se; it was the fact that meals were a time of fellowship, of shared, communal experience, celebrating love of God and one another.

Fifteen hundred years later, the Reformation *again* emphasized community through the reaffirmation of Christ's words, "The kingdom of God is within you," or, as the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible has it, "among you." That is, you could connect with God directly without the need of intermediaries — prophets, priests, saints, and so on. You could honor God by recognizing God in yourself and others. The Society of Friends or Quakers, for example, proclaimed that the presence of God and the light of Christ exist in every person. They rejected both sacraments and clergy and, shockingly, believed in the spiritual equality of men and women.

In the Episcopal church we have ritual, sacraments, and clerical hierarchy, but we, too, believe that to be in relationship with God is to be in community, even when we are communing with God alone. For me, an enduring example of living in community comes from deep in the heart of China, where I was born in a town called WuChang, a place you've never heard of but which is now known as Wuhan — a place we've *all* heard of. My parents were missionaries at the Anglican Mission there in the 1940s. They, like others at the mission, had responded to the plea from the Chinese bishop in HanKow for help in dealing with the devastation of the Japanese occupation during the Second World War.

The goal of the mission was not to convert souls so much as to live by Christian example, helping to staff the hospital and university, to support a school for the blind, a literacy program, a well-baby clinic and so on. As one of the mission clergy, my father taught religion at HuaChung University, then a small Christian college, now the University of Wuhan.

There were many privations, but for those in the mission, the great overarching joy of living in a giving Christian community superseded sacrifice. Then came the Communist Revolution. Lives were in danger. As Mao's army approached Wuhan, the State Department ordered all Americans out. With many others, my mother and sisters and I were evacuated to Hong Kong. But my father and a handful of others remained inside to help their Chinese brothers and sisters any way they could. When the Communists forces did take over the city, Christianity and Western ways were under attack. With escape a distant dream, my father wrote about his fellow missionaries in a letter that months later reached my mother:

"These are not extraordinary people. They are simply everyday folk who have given their lives in a way that really counts. Yet that loyalty of theirs has a bigness about it – a bigness that makes you

feel that they are more than thirty-five people in the center of a vast country and hundreds of miles from the nearest place of refuge ... And then it came to me what it was that made it seem so big. In the loyalty of these few missionaries is the very power of God – the power that is not found in force or armies or atom bombs or money or any other thing except in the loving hearts of men and women who have offered all they have and all they are ... The power of these thirty-five people is indeed a big power, and the future of China and the hope of the world rests finally in that kind of power, and that kind alone. There is only one thing that truly abides, and that is love."

Flash forward some 60 years to Barlow's HyVee grocery store, where I happened to hear the tonal notes of Chinese spoken somewhere nearby. It gave me a rush of joy, as it always does, like a song from long ago that stirs your heart. I rounded a pyramid of lemons and oranges to find an ancient Chinese couple and their daughter, who turned out to be a Mayo physician and served as translator for me and her parents.

I told them of my China background. The couple closed their eyes. The man began to weep. He and his wife grasped my hands, held my arm, nodding through their tears. Their daughter explained that they had been professors, stripped of their jobs and forced to work on a farm collective during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, never to teach again. When I asked them how they had survived, the couple said through the love of Jesus. I was taken aback. They explained they'd become Christian through an Anglican mission in their youth. While in the collective, they found other Christians. Demeaned, in forced labor, they found that bigness. They knew the kingdom of God was right there, not some distant ideal. There was no ritual they could celebrate other than being in relationship over communal meals and in communal prayers, whispered together. *How had they survived?* Through love of God shared *in community* — not unlike those early Christians. They gathered, they remembered, they gave of themselves.

It is common to say that church community was broken during the pandemic, but you and I know that even in the worst of it, *especially* in the worst of it, people made a conscious effort at fellowship—reaching out, checking in by phone, text, and email, re-establishing old friendships, solidifying new ones and gathering in driveways around fire pits. Instead of breaking community, in some ways the pandemic strengthened it.

Holy Communion is what we used to call the Eucharist. Communion — union, empathy, relationship, intimacy. Each Sunday this past summer, we have gathered here in this sanctuary in communal prayer. Friends and strangers, we opened ourselves to that bigness that is community as *Jesus* built it, as *Jesus* lived it. Direct fellowship with God. Let us hold onto it. Let us never forget it. Let us take it with us out into the world.

I invite you now to take a moment of silence to enter more deeply into communion with God and one another in the union that is our refuge, our joy, our home, our community. Amen.

--Penny Duffy