

I've been serving communion for nearly forty years in four churches as the installed pastor, and now seven churches as interim pastor, each church has been different: differences in communion ware, the size of the table, how it's placed on the table, how the congregation is served.

As interim, I'm very aware of traditions that churches have. I try not to confuse one church with another as I step behind the table.

In some churches, the bread and drink go out together, and others are like here where they are served separately.

There are differences in how the elders come in, formal processions at the beginning of the service or just come to the front pew during the service, and differences in how they are served.

When do ministers get served and where do the ministers sit?

And when I've asked about their particular way of serving communion, each congregation has answered, as if I should know, “Well, this is the Presbyterian way!”

More than anything, that says something about us Presbyterians!

Oh, of course, I think about ‘what if I forget to say the right words... what if I drop the bread... what if I spill the drink?’

In these forty years of serving communion, I've only had one elder drop the tray and spill the grape juice.

That's another difference. Two of the eleven churches have served both wine and grape juice.

This was a wine and grape juice church, but he was a curmudgeon and proud of it, so when he spilled the whole tray, I thought that was just God's sense of humor on his behalf!

I do remember a particular communion, it was my first Christmas Eve at this church during the last of the four services that evening, the second at which communion was served, at the end of a very long day...

The bread had been served, everyone held it and I was supposed to say, “The bread of life...” so that everyone could eat... but I just stood there, and the congregation sat there... and the associate pastor was standing next to me, urgently whispering, “The bread, the bread!!”

Yes, my thoughts do turn to things like that!

But those are the logistics of Communion.

My deepest heartfelt thoughts as I step behind this table, my thoughts turn to all who would come to this table, just being at the table myself.

Joyful, contemplative, humbled, expectant thoughts about being at the table to share in the mystery of God's hospitality through Jesus, who calls us, invites us to come to his table, to eat with him, to learn from him, to love as he has loved us.

It's not about the logistics, it's about the love that comes with being a friend of Jesus.

In our reading from John's gospel, Jesus is at the table with his disciples, the night of the Last Supper.

Jesus has washed the disciples' feet, broken bread and poured wine, and Judas has left for the betrayal.

Jesus says to those at the table, “I chose you, you did not choose me.”

I think it's so important to hear what he's not saying – he doesn't say, “I've got a dress code and a worship code and a doctrine code and a music code and a prayer code and a building code and a certain kind of people code for you to follow if you want to be my friend.”

I think Jesus is saying that he chooses to be with us: anytime, anywhere, for any reason, no matter what.

Carol King, in her classic song about being a friend, said it best: "You've got a friend, all you have to do is call, and I'll be there."

This table is where we share the friendship of Jesus Christ.

I think about that when I serve Communion because it has a lot to do with why I am Presbyterian.

My Grandmother Lancaster grew up out in the country in Louisiana and attended a certain church of a certain denomination, not Presbyterian.

When she got married and moved to town, the ladies of the town church in the denomination in which she had grown up would not visit her...her new husband, my grandfather, had once owned a pool hall!

The Presbyterian women however, did visit. They made a visit they didn't have to make to someone who wasn't expecting it but who was very glad to receive it.

Those ladies were friends of Jesus, and I am Presbyterian because my grandmother experienced the grace and acceptance and friendship of Jesus through them, a mysterious joy of having people show they love you even when you see yourself as unlovable and unwelcome.

Friends do that for you, don't they, love you no matter what.

You know Bruno Mars' song, "Count on Me":
*"If you ever find yourself stuck in the middle of the sea, I'll sail the world to find you;
If you ever find yourself lost in the dark and you can't see, I'll be the light to guide you;
Find out what we're made of
When we are called to help our friends in need."*

That's what's at stake for you and me as we come to this table.

Now let me be clear, it's easy to get distracted by the logistics of Communion, or to conveniently forget where and when these words were given and to get caught up in the sweet invitation to be Jesus' friends.

Growing up in the south, I was taught that "Everything goes better with sweet tea," and that's how we often think about friendship with Jesus.

We romanticize the part of Communion that talks about broken bodies and poured blood, so we can escape feeling troubled by the life Jesus calls us to follow as his friends.

We sweeten the tough ideas that will cost us something if we live by them.

We think all Jesus has to do in our friendship together is set the table for Sunday dinner. Then we can go home for a nice nap.

But when Jesus calls us his friends, he looks for us to live as his friends by obediently and sacrificially serving the world from this table.

Perhaps it would help us to think that when Jesus calls us friends, he's calling us to a friendship that's deeper than anything we know in this world of superficial friendships that have no responsibilities and have no real commitments.

Henri Nouwen described the call to Christian friendship, prophetically I think, because he wrote these words in 1975 in his book "Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life".

He said, "Our society seems to be increasingly hard and full of fearful, defensive, aggressive people anxiously clinging to their property and inclined to look at their surrounding world with suspicion, always expecting an enemy to suddenly appear, intrude and do harm."

Look around us, the conflicts of majority groups versus minority groups, the 'identity tribes' based on ethnicity or race, sexual orientation or gender, economic class or lifestyle, political or religious or moral passions; all of it creating an intensified sense of estrangement one from the other.

Jesus call us to look across this table at one another and see a place, not where strangeness breeds estrangement, but a place of engagement, what it really means to love one another.

When I serve communion, I think about what would happen if I saw my own worst enemy coming down the aisle to be served.

Would I turn to Carol and say, “You take this one”?

Picture that for yourself: your worst enemy comes and sits by you as the bread and the drink are being served

What is your first thought?

Honestly, would the first thing that you thought about be to turn and say, “Take, eat...take, drink...because Jesus has called me to be his friend, to love as he has loved me”?

This table ties us to the life and death of Jesus by service and sacrifice to love one another.

When he says to love as he has loved us, this bread and this cup are how we remember just how he has loved us.

I want you to picture the tables in your lives: kitchen tables, formal dining tables, picnic tables, school lunchroom tables, all sorts of tables...sitting with loved ones, maybe an empty chair now, but those tables where you remember being served and filled and loved even when you were unlovable or maybe where you made others feel unwelcome at that table.

I remember a table in my own life.

From the time I was thirteen until I was eighteen, all the Lancaster aunts, uncles, cousins, lived within 30 miles of the Lancaster family home.

So, we would gather on the second Sunday of each month at the Lancaster family home for Sunday dinner.

Adults and older cousins in the dining room, children in the kitchen at the yellow, Formica-topped table.

I had been allowed to move out of the kitchen when I was twelve, to the adult table, sort of a Southern style bar mitzvah!

My grandmother went back and forth from the kitchen to the tables making sure everybody got enough.

And even though some were estranged at other times, for that moment, that place, with those people, they were engaged by someone who loved us all, my grandmother, a true friend of Jesus Christ.

Every time I step behind this table, my thoughts go to that other table where my grandmother’s human hospitality revealed a divine hospitality where everyone gets enough.

As I said earlier, my deepest heartfelt thoughts as I step behind this table, my thoughts turn to all who would come to this table, just being at the table myself.

That’s why I like Tom Troeger’s hymn, “Look Who Gathers at Christ’s Table,”:

*Look who gathers at Christ’s table!
Hear the stories that they bring.
Some are weeping, some are laughing;
Some have songs they want to sing.*

*Others ask why they’re invited,
Burdened by the wrong they’ve done.
Christ insists they all are welcome.
There is room for everyone.*

Friends of Christ make room for everyone at the table, this table of Jesus’s loving friendship.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.