

Communion

Luke 22:14-20

HMC 8/10/2025

¹⁴ When the time came, Jesus took his place at the table, and the apostles joined him. ¹⁵ He said to them, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ I tell you, I won’t eat it until it is fulfilled in God’s kingdom.” ¹⁷ After taking a cup and giving thanks, he said, “Take this and share it among yourselves. ¹⁸ I tell you that from now on I won’t drink from the fruit of the vine until God’s kingdom has come.” ¹⁹ After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰ In the same way, he took the cup after the meal and said, “This cup is the new covenant by my blood, which is poured out for you.

But the hand of him who is going to betray me is with mine on the table. The Son of Man will go as it has been decreed. But woe to that man who betrays him!” They began to question among themselves which of them it might be who would do this.

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.

For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

INTRODUCTION

I decided to deviate a bit from the assigned readings for today because for some reason the Common Lectionary that is used by hundreds of denominations and millions of pastors each week does not list special readings for festivals that only we Moravians celebrate. Go figure. 😊

August 13, 1727 is a festival day for Moravians because it was on that day that the modern Moravian Church, which we sometimes call the Renewed Moravian Church, was blessed or birthed by the Holy Spirit. To put it mildly, 1727 was an extraordinary year for the Moravian Church and its mission to the world.

Every year at Home Church, we observe this festival with Holy Communion one week and a lovefeast the following week. Every year we retell the story of the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This morning, I won't tell the whole story because I know Ginny has things to say next week. I'll give just a portion of the story and its meaning for our worship today..

EXILES AND PILGRIMS

In 1722 the first house in the village of Herrnhut was built by a man named Christian David. He had convinced a group of people in Moravia to leave the safety and security of their homes and cross the mountains in the dark of night to live a new life in a foreign land. The people he led were all serious-minded people who had made the difficult decision to leave their families, their homes, and in some cases, even their tools, because they wanted to serve Christ and worship him in simplicity and sincerity.

For years their rulers in Moravia had forced everyone to be baptized Catholic and worship in their Catholic parish. But this group of young men had listened to Protestant evangelists like Christian David who illegally preached in the woods and other secluded places. They knew their ancestors had been part of the Unity of the Brethren, and that they had endured persecution to serve Christ simply and sincerely. The rulers tried to destroy the Unity of the Brethren: it was illegal to own a Bible in the Czech language or to own books written by Bishop Comenius. But some people read them in secret. As persecution increased, so did their desire to move to a more tolerant country.

Christian David told them about Count Zinzendorf who could give them shelter. The first group of settlers were mainly young men, but gradually women and children migrated as well. In all, 500 people left their homes to settle on Zinzendorf's estate.

Some of you here this morning may know what it is like to answer a call from Christ that disrupts your life and leads you to sell your home, pack up your belongings, and go to a place where you are a stranger. It is frightening. For me, it was just a matter of moving to Pennsylvania twice and then coming back home to Winston-Salem.

For most of us today, it is far less risky to answer God's call than it was for the people who built Herrnhut. They faced deportation and imprisonment. At least one of the Moravian brothers died in prison. The Moravians in Herrnhut were exiles and refugees. But many of them would become pilgrims and missionaries who went to St Thomas, Greenland, and America. One went all the way to South Africa.

The early residents of Herrnhut took their faith seriously. They lived frugally and worked hard because they were poor and because they devoted themselves to serving God not Mammon. Unfortunately, sometimes people who are very serious about their faith can be judgmental and argumentative. The Moravians also carried scars from years of religious oppression, and so they could be overly sensitive about matters of doctrine and practice.

CONFLICT

Since the Moravian refugees were living on the estate of Count Zinzendorf they were technically members of the Lutheran parish of Berthelsdorf. This meant they were expected to receive the rites and sacraments of the Lutheran Church and agree to Lutheran doctrine. The pastor was a popular and charismatic preacher name Andreas Rothe.

At first the refugees from Moravia appreciated Rothe's sermons and pastoral care, but gradually things deteriorated. They disagreed about the meaning of Holy Communion and how it should be served. They argued about whether Christ is really present in communion or only symbolically present. I apologize for quoting a former President, but the disagreement was over the meaning of the word "is". Does "this is my body" mean "this symbolizes my body" or "this is physically my body?"

Calvinists in Herrnhut believed that the bread and wine represented or symbolized the body and blood of Christ. For them, Communion is simply a ritual to help people remember Christ's death. But the Lutherans believed that the bread and wine contained the physical body and blood of Christ. During Holy Communion, simple foods were transformed into sacred food. Since the bread and wine were the body and blood of Christ, the pastor insisted that people must kneel when they received communion. To the Moravian refugees, kneeling before the consecrated bread reminded them too much of the Catholic Church they had fled. They refused to kneel.

CONFESSION

Pastor Rothe did something else that upset the Moravians even more. He required them to come to him and privately confess their sins before they could take communion. The Moravians were not opposed to confessing their sins. What they objected to was kneeling before the pastor in confession. This seemed to them

contrary to Jesus' example and teaching. Many of the refugees simply refused to kneel, and the pastor got angry at them and refused to serve them communion.

There were many meetings between the folks in Herrnhut and the pastor, but the meetings only made things worse as harsh accusations flew. Finally, many of the people in Herrnhut quit going to the parish church entirely. They held prayer meetings and preaching services on their own, which was illegal in Germany at that time. But Zinzendorf allowed them to do this.

ZINZENDORF LISTENED

More importantly, Zinzendorf listened. He listened to the Moravians as they told stories of the oppression they had experienced in their homeland. He listened to them talk about why they had come to Herrnhut – and how much they had sacrificed on the way. He listened to them sing about their love for Jesus and their sincere desire to follow the will of God. He listened to their fervent prayers. He listened to their criticisms of him and Rothe. He listened their own bickering and arguing over doctrines like predestination and the atonement and whether wealth is sinful.

Zinzendorf listened and learned. He led them in Bible studies and prayer groups. And then Zinzendorf wrote a Brotherly Agreement that set forth new rules for the people who wanted to live in Herrnhut. The rules defined how they should work for the common good, how they should deal with conflicts, and how they should submit to the will of God. The new rules granted the Herrnhuters the privilege to hold their own worship services and elect their own elders and officers.

Zinzendorf also talked to his friend, Pastor Rothe. He explained who these people were and why they were so sensitive to things like kneeling before a pastor to confess their sins. And slowly, the pastor and the people came to a better understanding of each other. A sign of this better understanding was that Rothe was allowed to confirm some of the young people from Herrnhut as members of the parish.

AUGUST 13

It was a Wednesday when the ritual of confirmation took place. Most of the residents of Herrnhut stopped work early and attended the confirmation service to show that they were open to reconciliation. The service ended with Holy Communion, and it was during that communion that everyone in the church felt the real presence of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

They felt that Christ was truly, spiritually with them, not just in the bread and wine, but in their prayers, the music, the liturgy, and especially in the tears that were falling down the pastor's face. They felt Christ among them and that the Holy Spirit was breaking down the barriers they had created with their dogmatism and self-righteousness. Everyone in the church felt an overwhelming sense of communion, of union, of reconciliation, of holiness and sanctification. The ritual of communion was no longer just a habit or symbol; it was truly *holy* communion.

Those very serious Moravians who had sacrificed so much, but were also prone to self-righteousness and judgmentalism experienced something new. They were, to quote C. S. Lewis, surprised by Joy. Their hearts melted from the warmth of the love of God. Through their tears they could see each other for the first time as brothers and sisters. From that moment on, Herrnhut became a different community. Love ruled where anger and judgment had ruled.

LUKE'S COMMUNION

If a few minutes, we will be sharing in the sacred meal we call Holy Communion. One of the distressing things in the history of Christianity is that this holiest of rituals has been the source of so much conflict and division among Christians. When Zinzendorf and the Moravians examined the Scriptures, they pondered passage like the one we just heard from the Gospel of Luke. The ritual of Holy Communion began when Jesus observed the Passover feast with his disciples. At one point in the meal, he took bread, gave thanks, and gave it them saying, "This is my body, which is given for you." In the same way, he took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood."

That's all there is. Long before the communion service of August 13, 1727, Moravian Bishop John Amos Comenius pointed out that if Jesus had wanted to clarify the mystery of Holy Communion, he would have done so. Jesus would have told us if this meal is a miracle or a symbol, but instead he simply said, "this cup is the new covenant sealed with my blood." This sacred meal is not a puzzle to solve or a philosophical theorem to prove. It is a mystery to be enjoyed, not with our tongues but with our hearts.

CONCLUSION

This sacred meal is the sign of the new covenant of grace. Each time we share this bread and drink this cup, we reaffirm the new covenant of grace, the new covenant of

love, the new covenant of forgiveness and reconciliation. Each time we share this bread and drink this cup we proclaim Christ's death until he comes again, or we are called home to him. What our Moravian ancestors learned three hundred years ago is that the *holy* communion comes when we lay aside our self-righteousness, our indignation, our theological quibbles, our criticisms of each other, and come to this table as beggars at the wedding feast of the Lamb of God. They learned that the kingdom of God is not filled with the cacophony of angry debate but with the harmony of joyful singing and the laughter of the saints. Today, we commune with Christ and all the saints in heaven and on earth. All are welcome to this spiritual feast.

As we sing the next hymn, let us prepare our hearts and minds to be in communion with Christ and with one another. May we feel the presence of the Holy Spirit, and may we go forth in joyful service.