

Sermon 1-19-2025: The Communion of Community
Morning Minister Ruthie Tippin, Spokane Friends Meeting
Luke, Chapter 22 and 24, John 6
New Interpreter's Bible Commentary IX, Luke
Barclay's Apology in Modern English, Dean Friday, editor, 1967.
Our Live is Love, The Quaker Spiritual Journey, Marcelle Martin, Inner Light Books, 2016.

God is here today. Just as God is with us every day, God is with us now. Your breath, your body, the space you hold in the world, is a testament to the truth of God's creation and the necessity for your life. There is a reason and a purpose for each one of us. There is a reason and a purpose for God.

God's presence with us is one of the most significant gifts we hold in our spiritual lives. This is the mystery of a spiritual life; God with us. Companionship with God – to keep company with God – is to remember that God is with us always. We are never alone. Even when we pray alone, God is with us. We do not share our thoughts, questions, concerns with empty space, but with a Spirit who prays with us, hearing and responding in love. This is the gift of companionship – a gift we can trust.

Companionship is a gift we can see. It's a gift that deepens over time and burgeons into a deeper relationship in community. It's one thing to befriend God, to companion with God, but to grow into community *with others who know* God is to deepen a connection with God. It's to deepen a relationship with God, but also with those who know God too. Suddenly, God expands. God looks different. God sounds different. God acts in so many different and disparate ways. God doesn't just sing – God hammers. God builds. God cooks. God gardens. God heals. God...

Marcelle Martin, in her book "Our Life is Love", quotes a description by Francis Howgill, an Early Friend, of their collective experience of God's presence:

"The Kingdom of Heaven did gather us and catch us all, as in a net, and his heavenly power at one time drew many hundreds to land. We came to know a place to stand in and what to wait in; and the Lord *appeared* daily to us, to our astonishment, amazement and great

admiration, insomuch that we often said one unto another with great joy of heart: 'What, is the Kingdom of God *come* to be with men?... And holy resolutions were kindled in our hearts as a fire which the Life kindled in us to serve the Lord while we had a being.... And from that day forward, our hearts were knit unto the Lord and one unto another in true and fervent love, in the covenant of Life with God... And thus, the Lord, in short, did form us to be a people for his praise in our generation." [1663]

As the early Friends found their way as a community, as a Society of Friends, they were "careful to distinguish true unity in God's loving Spirit, from outward conformity in behavior or professed belief." Inward unity was possible, even when there were different outward ways of understanding God's will. It made, and still makes for a remarkable, beautiful, and very interesting community!

In community, Friends affirm and listen to each other. We celebrate and grieve together.

We join in witness to the world together. But Quakers also annoy and offend each other. It *has* happened! Working together, making decisions together, helps us discover the differences we have, and the opinions we want to express. As Marcelle Martin points out, "It's a misperception that Quakers seek consensus. Actually, Friends wait for more than mere *agreement* about a decision. Together they seek 'the sense of the meeting,' a collective discernment about the will of God for the group. Quaker business practice rests on the conviction that indeed, God *does* have a will for us and that collectively, through worship, prayer, and attentive listening, we can come to know what that will is."

I am not certain that any other community of faith practices their decision making in this way. Most faith groups I know use voting as a way of making decisions. Seeking the sense of the meeting is a unique and challenging form of discernment, and it takes practice, patience, and a strong sense of community to do it well.

And that brings us to communion, established in scripture by the last meal the disciples ate with Jesus before his death. After three years of living with Jesus, listening to, walking with, sleeping, eating, healing, fishing, getting in trouble, getting out of trouble, and even more... the disciples were told to show up at a certain place at a certain time during one of the busiest, craziest seasons of the year in Jerusalem for Passover Meal with Jesus. They'd done this before. But this time, Jesus said they'd find a man carrying a jar of water when they came into town, and to follow him to a house, and to ask for the Guest Room. That's where they'd eat. So, they did. And it turned out just like Jesus said it would.

Jesus gathered his disciples together and before they ate, he made it clear that this Passover meal was going to be different. It would be his last, before he would suffer, and he was *eager* for them to drink and eat it with him. He would not eat or drink again until the kingdom of God would come. Like the bread and wine, his body would be broken and bloodied, given and poured out for them. He gave thanks, passed the cup of wine, broke the bread, and said "Do this in remembrance of me." And they ate.

Communion begins with companionship – getting to know one another, strangers becoming friends. It moves more deeply into community – learning to trust each other. Until it finally deepens into communion – giving, spending your life for and with others, more than for yourself. This is what we discover in Jesus' life, and in the life of humankind. It often happens in times of celebration of new life or grieving great loss. We have seen it over and over, perhaps without recognizing it. At times, it's been very obvious.

Strangers become neighbors. Neighbors form a community. A community deepens into communion; when fire breaks out losing their homes, schools, churches, businesses, and now they encircle each other to find a place to grieve and discover what is next.

Refugees became prisoners and hostages. They've become a community of world concern and politics – tenuous trust. And now, those who survive

wait to be released into a communion of healing, stability, family, love, and life.

I think it's curious that just before, and then just after Jesus' death, Christ shares a meal with us – an intimate meal. The Last Supper at Passover, and then... On the day Jesus rose from the dead, two men were walking home to Emmaus from Jerusalem, some seven miles, talking about all that had just happened. A fellow traveler came by, as often happened, and they joined together walking and he asked what they'd been discussing. "Are you the only one living in Jerusalem who doesn't know what has happened???" They told their story of Jesus of Nazareth's. The man told them they were foolish, not to have understood it all, and then, starting with Moses...

They eventually got to Emmaus, asked him to stay with them, which he did, and shared a meal together. "When he was at table with them, he took the bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight." They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:30-32)

When we, as Friends, enter into Communion after the Manner of Friends, or Waiting Worship, we have no Cup or Bread. We have only Living Bread - Living Water. We feast on the Presence of God with us, in us, around us. What could be better? More satisfying? More challenging? The symbols – the cup, the bread, are lovely. But the reality of Christ's living presence **with us** is the True Communion we must seek. From a first prayer of thanksgiving for companionship with ourselves alone as we begin – God *with* us, to a deep breath - understanding the sense of God's presence surrounding us all in community together – God with *all of us*, to a deepening of union with God's spirit in communion – God *giving us just what we need*, taking in the word of life God has for each of us – whatever that may be – is quite a feast.

R. Alan Culpepper, in his Commentary on Luke's Gospel has this wonderful thing to say about communion: "The challenge for the believer is not that we grasp the full potential of the meaning of communion, but that we open ourselves to the full extent of its power to change us and create intimacy among the worshiper and the stranger, among other peoples, and with the Lord whom we worship. What then shall we do *after* we [feast] together?"