

# The Obligation of Communion

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**Third Presbyterian Church**  
**October 2, 2016 (World Communion Sunday)**  
**2 Timothy 1:1-14 and Luke 17:5-10**

In 1996, when the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) convened down the Thruway in Syracuse, I was given the task of overseeing a pre-assembly conference. We lined up great speakers, and we also sought strong worship leadership for the event. We called John Cairns, who would later become my predecessor here. He agreed to help out but also suggested that we would be well-served, and more than well-served, if the church's organist and director of music could also be recruited.

It was then that I learned what a fine musician Peter DuBois was, with a deep liturgical and theological sensitivity. What I didn't learn until later was what a strong spiritual leader and extraordinary colleague he was, what a good family man, teacher, friend, and, much later, an excellent DJ! Not to mention a tolerable Michigan fan!!

Today we mark Peter's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary at Third Church. It is quite a milestone, for him, and, thankfully, for us. I could say so much more, but what I will simply say on behalf of your colleagues and this community of faith, Peter, is thank you, thank you and blessings...

All are invited to a reception in the Celebration Center following this service, where you may greet Peter and family. Now we pondered what we might do to mark this occasion, and I can report with some glee that thanks to the creative prowess of Jeanne Fisher, and the cunning and generosity of the Chancel Choir, we will in fact NOT be singing the final hymn as it is printed in the bulletin. Sorry, Peter, though I enjoyed hearing you rehearse it yesterday. Rather, as our final hymn we will sing a new hymn, called "Lord, Through Music Hear Us Praying," set to one of Peter's favorite hymn tunes, called "Michael," with a wonderful new commissioned text by the noted hymn writer Thomas Troeger. Peter, Caroline will play. Everybody else in the house has a copy. Now you do as well. You sing, and listen, and receive in a musical way our deep appreciation. Then we can eat cake!

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Our household was faced with a decision Monday night. Perhaps you were too. To watch the debate or not watch the debate. That was the question. You get what I am saying, I am quite sure. In the end we watched.

There are things you do. If you are a parent, you wipe noses and change diapers and drive to endless rehearsals and practices. If you are a musician, you play scale after scale after scale. If you are a garbage collector, you get up every morning, rain or shine, hot or cold, regardless of the deep ache in your bones. If you are a teacher, you grade papers.

If you are a citizen, you engage. You inform yourself. You watch the debates. Then you vote. Regardless, it is what you do. It is your obligation.

We live in an interesting time when obligation seems to be a wrestled-with concept. We don't like to be told what to do, by anyone, for any reason. And yet we know, do we not, for a team to play well, it must practice. For a restaurant to be successful, the dishes must be washed. For a democracy to live up to its potential, its vision, its citizens must embrace their obligations.

What about the obligations of our faith? That's an even more interesting question in 2016. As much as everything is shifting rapidly, religion is as well, including our version of it. In earlier eras we spoke of the obligation to attend worship, or give, or volunteer, driven by a combination of guilt and habit and cultural expectation and who knows what else.

Now all that is up for grabs, which is not all bad. Because still that word is out there, obligation, but we are now liberated from the constriction of cultural expectation. Now obligation has been re-framed and re-calibrated. What is ours? What is the mandate, we who follow Jesus, to behave in certain ways, not any more because some authority or convention tells us to, but because our gut tells us to, our spirit, our deep sense of calling?

Today is one of my favorite Sundays in the year. Since the 1930's, and started by Presbyterians, much of the Christian world has observed something called World Communion Sunday. Not only do I love what it stands for, people all over the world, breaking bread, sharing a cup, a symbolic sign of the unity we discover at Christ's table...not only do I love what it stands for, I appreciate what it obligates us to do, commands and compels us to do.

At its best, the church is the great leveler, where there is, as the Bible says, no Jew or Greek, no male or female, no slave or free – and by extension we would say no gay or straight, no liberal or conservative, no rich or poor, no black or brown or white, with the broadest spectrum imaginable of physical and mental capacities, where *all* lives matter only when *every* life matters.

As the church is the great leveler, this communion table is the great symbol of that reality. All have a place, everyone born, and when we sit down, all are at the same height and all receive the same bread and the same cup. All. That is our gift, and that is our obligation.

Karl Barth said that faith was about living with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. We could say that faith is about watching the debate with one eye and this table with

the other, to see how our primary obligation, faith, is lived out in the context of every other obligation – as neighbor, as friend, as family member, as citizen.

How are we doing? Listen again to what the Apostle Paul writes in the letter called II Timothy. He speaks about his own clear conscience, a product of the promise of life that he experiences through Christ Jesus. Then he acknowledges Timothy's own spiritual journey, Timothy's tears, his sincerity, the witness of his grandmother and mother, their faithfulness. But something is wrong. The disciples asked Jesus to increase their faith. Timothy seeks the same. The flame of his faith is fading. We do not know why. Perhaps it is doubt, or fear, or confusion, or perceived failure. But faith can fade, Timothy's and ours. Mine has, and does, and will. Faith fades.

Paul does not condemn, but rather encourages. Let the gift of God that is in you be rekindled. If you seek to renew your faith, the spirit of God's love and power will sustain you. This is where the obligation comes in, in Paul's reminder to Timothy of Paul's own imprisonment for the faith. Faith is not always a walk in the park, nor a bundle of warm feelings. This obligation can produce suffering, then and now. But this is a holy calling, infused with grace, infused with light and life. We have been given a gift, Paul writes, a good treasure. We are to be stewards of it. That is our obligation, never easy, *never easy*, always rewarding.

In his book called *Reconciliation: Restoring Justice*, South African theologian John De Gruchy writes that "the sacraments connect Christian doctrine and social ethics at a primary level of expression." (Page 96) In the season of apartheid in South Africa, De Gruchy writes, communion became a sign of division and a source of abuse. In the post-apartheid world, the sacrament can become what it truly always was, a means of grace for healing and transformation, for creating community, a sacrament of reconciliation.

"The significance of the table," De Gruchy writes, "as the space around which the new community meets and is formed is also a sign of the reconciliation God wills for society as a whole. It points beyond the liturgy of the 'upper room' to the family meal, the sharing of goods with the poor, and the round table of political negotiation... (Communion) is not only a sharing in the 'breaking of bread' but a commitment to share our lives and goods with those in need, that is to become 'bread for the world.'" (Page 99)

That is an extraordinary affirmation to me. At any communion moment, and punctuated profoundly on World Communion Sunday, when the bread is broken and the cup is poured and we partake, not only do we confirm that our relationship with God has been restored, but we commit and re-commit to the restoration of every human relationship. This is "bread for the world" and not simply bread for our souls or bread for the church.

Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf writes that "Inscribed on the very heart of God's grace is the rule that we can be its recipients only if we do not resist being made into its agents; what

happens *to* us (at communion) must be done *by* us. Having been embraced by God, we must make space for others in ourselves and invite them in – even our enemies. That is what we enact when we celebrate (communion)...we celebrate the giving of the self to the other and the receiving of the other into the self.” (Pages 129-130)

It is a profound and faithful and beautiful move, to link South Africa, and Croatia, and Rochester, with what happens here, at this table. That is the obligation of communion, the joyful, demanding obligation of communion.

It would be easier not to do the things this table compels us to do – to retreat into private faith, to accept what is, to not say or do the right thing, to spiritualize away the bread and cup.

On this World Communion Sunday, we remember a prayer from the Eastern Orthodox Church, a portion of the communion prayer: “This is the day of resurrection. Let us be illumined by the feast. Let us embrace each other. Let us call ‘brothers’ (and Sisters) even those that hate us, and forgive all by the resurrection.” (Volf, page 130)

Communion as both cosmic restoration and political reconciliation. So much riding on a little morsel of bread and a few drops from a cup. Amen.