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Special? Mundane? Both?  
Martin Grove United Church  
October 7, 2018  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Mark 10:2-16

I find it interesting that the lectionary gives us that gospel reading on World Communion Sunday. Who could imagine that a text about the legal aspects of divorce would be relevant on World Communion Sunday? Well, me! In some ways it's the perfect text for today. If that surprises you then perhaps you think Jesus was talking about divorce. Well, he sort of was of course, he did use the word after all. But I will use preacher's prerogative and say that - in today's language anyway - Jesus was talking about something else entirely.

Remember that 2000 years ago, marriage was about property. It was about who should own a woman - and the only real options were: her husband or her father. When a woman got married, it was a transfer of property from the father to the new husband, an act often symbolized even in modern wedding services where the father walks the bride down the aisle and then hands her over to the husband. Marriage was a sales agreement. It was more than that of course, because the woman was expected to produce more properly for the man in the form of children. And yes, love was a factor in some cases. But 2000 years ago, marriage was a sales contract, and divorce was a breach of that contract. Jesus's words about divorce are meaningless to us today, because our understanding of marriage is incompatible with the social norms of 2000 years ago.

Nevertheless, Jesus says that God intended something by the human dynamic we call "relationships", but humans didn't have the imagination to grasp that and according to the story, Moses therefore had to put rules in place. The free loving relationships we can perhaps glimpse in Genesis became something constrained and controlled and connected to property and ownership. It became something we need rules for. Rules are sometimes important. But rules can also get in the way of the intentions they were designed to enhance.

And I think the same process has happened with communion. Read through the

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“last supper” stories in the gospels and you get a picture of a pot luck meal where Jesus shares some unwelcome news with his friends. In 3 out of 4 gospels, the meal coincides with the celebration of passover, although the description of the meal itself suggests otherwise. From those stories we extract the idea that at communion we share bread and wine. How that simple meal of leftovers became associated with some of our communion traditions is a fascinating story - a journey actually. And some of the communion traditions we have are quite varied. But churches have put rules in place around communion that perhaps obscure the purpose of celebrating communion.

I'm surprised that we don't have world baptism Sunday. Because baptism is the one sacrament that we - the global Christian community - actually share in the same way. I don't mean that we use the same trappings. I mean that the act of baptism is done in the same way. Sure, some denominations sprinkle water and others practice full immersion, but the water is secondary. The “act” of baptism is when the priest/minister say those magic words, “I baptize you in the name of ...” we all know the words, say them with me: “In the name of the father, the son, and the holy spirit (or the holy ghost).”

That's all we need for baptism. Mind you, there is nothing so simple that you can't make it more complicated. I have heard that in some churches they find the words, “father, son, and holy spirit” sexist, so they have made up new words. When I perform baptisms, I use the traditional words for the simple reason that baptism is not ours (in the sense of belonging to this congregation). It is “ours” in the sense of belonging to the global Christian community. Therefore, I use the words that the global Christian community has agreed to.

Both communion and baptism are very simple acts, that over the years have come to take on a variety of complex traditions. Sometimes, it feels like the extra complications make the traditions more meaningful. Sometimes, it feels like the extra complications just serve to obscure the original intention.

For baptisms, I have seen churches that use special water .... sometimes a few drops of water from the river Jordan are added to the tap water. I have seen churches where part of baptism involves anointing the person with oil. For communion I have seen churches where the exact order in which the elements are distributed seems to be

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crucial - choir first or choir last? Minister first or minister last? In some churches, these are issues that are hotly debated.

Observing other communion and baptism traditions is always fascinating, because it invites us to more deeply consider our own traditions. For example - what do you think needs to happen right here for us to celebrate “real” communion? Are there steps in our liturgy that only ministers can do? Do we actually need bread and wine? Or is it ok to use bread and juice? Should we use special bread? Does the clergy person have to wave their hand over the chalice 3 times? Do supplicants - that’s you - have to kneel down to receive the elements? Are you allowed to touch the host - the bread - or should the clergy deposit it in your mouth?

At one congregational retreat I organized we participated in a Coptic Orthodox Mass. One of the surprising things was that the priest used a little spoon - like a teaspoon but with a longer handle - to spoon the wine into people’s mouths. And on this occasion, the priest gave everybody 3 spoonfuls of wine. Why 3 you ask? I assumed it was 3 to represent the trinity - duh. Was I ever wrong!! I asked the priest about it afterwards over lunch. Their group - and most other Christian groups - have the idea that once communion wine is blessed, the wine must all be consumed during the worship service. And at that particular mass, the attendance was lower than anticipated, so the priest was simply sharing the wine by giving everyone more than 1 spoonful. In coarse terms the priest was simply trying to use up the wine. Nothing at all to do with the trinity! Nothing at all to do with theology.

In any case, there are an amazing number of differences in how communion is celebrated. One of those differences is the term “communion” itself, a term not embraced by all churches. In fact, our attempts to celebrate “World Communion Sunday” actually exclude most Christians because they don’t know the word “communion”. And World Communion Sunday is - predominantly - celebrated by North American Protestants.

All the varied communion traditions can be quite interesting. And while some of them carry a great deal of historical and pastoral meaning, none of them carry much theological weight. In my mind, simple is best. Jesus used bread and wine because that's what he had. By that logic, we could be dipping samosas into chutney sauce. That’s why

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we should all be grateful that our worship committee provides the communion elements here. I might get a bit too creative if I did the shopping myself.

[is communion special? What does that mean to you?]

One thing I like about different communion traditions is the way that they balance the special and the mundane into one liturgy. The “special” is connected to our understanding of communion. Here at Martin Grove United Church we follow the standard United Church of Canada practice of only celebrating communion during Sunday morning worship about 5 times per year as a way to help preserve the specialness of communion. We actually have been celebrating communion here 10 times per year if you count other communion celebrations, but the other 5 occasions are special because of the events themselves, like Ash Wednesday, and the Longest Night Service. When the United Church of Canada was formed there was a concern that communion too often would leave it feeling less special. The “special” aspect of communion is important.

The mundane part of communion is also important. Bread is pretty mundane after all. Even the words, “eat this in memory of me” is pretty basic. Communion uses the mundane elements of bread and juice because Jesus used bread and wine at the last supper, but there is a deeper meaning. The deeper meaning of using bread and juice for communion is that communion is open and available to all people. You don’t need golden goblets. You don’t need caviar. You just need the inexpensive, commonly available food “of the people” in order to reflect God’s love, as long as you share the food in community.

Communion - at its best - embraces both - the special and the mundane in balance and in harmony. Communion is a mix of special and mundane. Sundays are a mix of special and mundane. Church is a mix of special and mundane. Life is a mix of special and mundane. You are a mix of special and mundane.

The distinction - and the common ground - between the special and the mundane is also relevant today because it is also Thanksgiving Sunday. I say that because when we think of gratitude ... well, let’s just do that ourselves right now. Think of what you

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are grateful for. Often, what is top-of-mind around gratitude are special things. Special people in our lives. Special experiences we have had. And special is great. But perhaps if we paid a bit more attention, we could come to a renewed appreciation for the mundane in our own lives. If you made your own list of things are are grateful for, how many of us would even put things on that list that we simply can't live without but that we ignore everyday. Think of Oxygen. Think of gravity. Think of photosynthesis. Think of those and the many other things we cannot live without and yet we completely ignore in our day to day lives.

On a social level, are we ever grateful that we possess the gift of communication? The gift of empathy. The gift of our feelings. The gift of being able to listen - really listen - to each other. The gift of basic companionship. These are things we cannot live without and yet we completely ignore them in our day to day lives.

And on a spiritual level, are we ever grateful for the gift that God is present even when we don't recognize that. The gift of our connection to each other. The gift of our connection to our world. The gift we call the peace of God. These are things we cannot live without and yet we completely ignore them in our day to day lives.

So this Thanksgiving, be grateful for what is special to you. Be grateful for what is mundane. You are special. You are mundane. You are a child of God. Give thanks.

*Amen.*