

**October 1, 2017 – Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
World Communion Sunday
“An Unexpected Communion”
Rev. Dr. Scott Landis
Matthew 21:23-32**

The gospel stories during this period of “ordinary time” in the liturgical calendar do not follow any particular chronological order. For example, today’s story comes shortly after Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem – commonly referred to as Palm Sunday. He had been hailed as the Messiah. Folks were wild with excitement about what he might do, could do to usher in the kingdom of God the inauguration of which starts off with a bang!

Just after Jesus enters the holy city of Jerusalem, he proceeds to the Temple. It is there that he expresses his outrage at the money changers, as well as those selling goods and services supposed to aid in worship – but were really there only to make money. He overthrows the tables, decries the various practices, and demands purity by saying, “My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers,” as he drives them out. The chief priests and elders were both angered and puzzled. He acts like a lunatic, they thought, yet he heals lame and restores sight to the blind.

The next day they summon the courage to question him, “By what authority do you do these things?” The implication being, “Jesus, this is not the way we do things here. Not here in Jerusalem. This is the cathedral. We have an order to follow. There is a right way to worship. A holy way to act. And you’re not following the rules. That’s not the way we do things here.

A United Church of Christ colleague in Massachusetts tells the story of an incident that occurred during worship this past spring. She decided to preach a Lenten series on communion following a troubling fall that left our nation deeply divided and many in her congregation fearful about our future. Communion, she thought would get to the essence of who we are as church and how Christ could be incarnate in the world through we who receive this grace meal and carry its blessing into the broader community.

The fifth Sunday of Lent was a communion Sunday and she was heartened by the wooden table in the chancel filled with fresh bread and juice – a table of welcome and abundance.

She describes how she was about half-way through the sermon – a high moment sharing her deep conviction at how communion is the defining symbol of our faith – when the side door to the sanctuary opened and in walked Harriet (pseudonym) a woman who had been worshipping there on and off for a couple of months as she participated as a guest artist in Common Art, a Boston-based program for unhoused or low-income people. The door shut with a bang and many folks diverted their attention from her brilliant exegesis to Harriet who walked in front of the pulpit and toward the center aisle and almost to a pew near the front. That is until she spied the table.

Instead of going to the pew, Harriet went up to the table. The sermon continued, but I can assure you no one was listening. Harriet took a piece of bread and ate it, and then another, and then another to the shock and bewilderment to those sitting in the pews as they wondered what to do. After a couple of minutes – which seemed like an eternity –

Harriet filled both hands with bread, made her way half-way down the center aisle, and slipped into a pew.

The congregation relaxed as an almost audible sigh of relief could be heard in the sanctuary. She was almost finished with the sermon when Harriet was up, again. She made her way back to the table for more bread. At this point Brenda (pseudonym), one of the deacons slipped out of her pew, and walked unhurriedly up to the table as well. Standing next to Harriet, Brenda wrapped her arm lovingly around Harriet's shoulders. When Harriet was finished – when she had all the bread she needed – they turned together and walked slowly back to the pew, Harriet holing the bread in her hands and Brenda holding Harriet. They sild into the pew, side by side, together.¹

Pastor Stacy Swain of the Union Church in Waban, MA explains how this story in Matthew reminded her of that “unexpected communion” in her and her congregation's life – an event that changed hers forever. That just as the religious authorities had in their minds “the proper way to do things,” Jesus had another idea. His authority coming from God demanded a different approach.

Similarly, just as the good parishioners in Waban, MA had an expectation of the way worship would proceed that day, how they would – at the right moment – walk down the aisle and receive the bread and juice through intinction, receive that sacred meal, God had another idea – an unexpected communion – whereby God would speak to them in a way they never imagined before.

In his excellent book, *Selling Water by the River*, Shane Hipps has a wonderful quote that captures some of what is going on in this passage and what was happening in church that Sunday in Waban, MA: "Some, in an effort to protect and preserve the gospel message, have become like the guards in a museum, fueled by fear that its treasures could be damaged or stolen if they are not vigilant in their watch. They have mistaken the good news for an ancient artifact that needs to be protected. But that is not its nature. This kingdom is a lot more like a tree. God is looking for gardeners, not guards. A guard is trained in a defensive stance of fear and suspicion. A gardener is motivated by love and creativity" (*Selling Water by the River*).²

The chief priests and elders acted as “guards” as Jesus entered with a new teaching – as one with authority. They tried to guard that which they perceived to be holy – and to keep it so. While Brenda acted as a gardener as she lovingly and unhurriedly placed her arm around Harriet assuring her that the seed of grace planted in her just needed a little assurance in order to grow.

To use Jesus' question, “Who do you think did the will of the father?”

On this World Communion Sunday our table is spread with breads representing cultures from around the world. As we eat this bread and drink this cup we join millions around the world on this day recommitting ourselves to the Christ who is incarnate in our lives calling us to heal that which divides us, challenging us to seek peace within as well as among all beings everywhere. An unexpected communion to be sure. What might we do to be gardeners of that grace, that hope, that possibility in our church and in our world today?

¹ Stacy Swain, Reflections on the Lectionary – The Christian Century, September 13, 2017, p. 18. Used by permission of the author.

² Mark Suriano, Sermon Seeds, www.ucc.org – October 1, 2017.