

A Sermon by the Rev. Endre Nagy (Nagy Endre, in Hungarian)
Translated by the Rev. Endre Nagy Jr.
Preached at Partner Church Sunday, April 26, 2009
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, Maryland

Part I

When we left our home on April 16th and then a day later our flight took off from the Budapest airport, we were still in the spirit of our Easter holiday celebrations and we still had recent memories of our worship services during the Easter holidays. On the occasion of our church holidays we always have a large congregation present in our sanctuary and this is also true for Easter. At this year's Easter Sunday church service we had 200 attendants present.

To honor the request from the Cedar Lane congregation to give a presentation about our church life in the Unitarian Church in Transylvania, I started thinking about one of our essential liturgical customs, one that was at the center of our holiday celebrations in our worship service through the centuries in the history of our church and still is at the center of our liturgy today as well. This liturgical act is communion.

This liturgy has its roots in the Bible. It comes from the last supper that Jesus had together with his disciples on the night before his crucifixion, the night before his death. The process of how this original event became a part of the Christian liturgy is found through the retelling of the original event in the scriptures. The apostle Paul also had a large role in the development of the liturgy of communion in the early Christian communities. Paul writes about the canonic tradition of communion in his first letter to the Corinthian community. (1Corinthians 11; 23-25)

Later, through the centuries of Christian history the tradition of communion, its forms and its interpretations developed in different directions. This was also one of the reasons and one of the debates of the Christian Reformation in 16th century Europe, and these questions around communion led to the birth of most Protestant Christian denominations we know today through the different approaches to the signs of bread and wine, and the theologies that connected these signs with the blood and the body of Jesus Christ. In this process every denomination developed a particular vision of communion, a so-called communion-doctrine that stood at the base of debates that lasted several centuries and produced a literature so vast that it could fill whole libraries.

I do not consider it important at this occasion to talk more about the theological meaning of communion; let us just note that for us Unitarians the signs of communion - the bread and the wine – are nothing more than symbols, which represent our way of remembering Jesus. And this remembering does not focus on the passion-narrative, on the sufferings and death of Jesus; on the contrary, we emphasize, focus on the life of Jesus and on his prophetic work and teachings.

I would like to share with you now the role of communion in our worship service. I will also talk about how exactly it happens.

Regularly we have communion four times a year on our main holidays - Easter, Pentecost, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Only Thanksgiving has no direct connection with the life of Jesus, it is rather a specifically Unitarian holiday that is always on the last Sunday of September. Other than these occasions we also can have communion on special events like church celebrations, the Synod, church dedications, ordinations, and lately church and

village community reunions.

The preparation and the form of communion: The bread and the wine for communion always come through a donation from a church member and their family, in every case the donation is made in the spirit of remembrance of their lost beloved family members. Church members would announce their intent for a communion donation well in advance; in our congregation in Dicsoszentmarton we know one or even two years in advance who will be donating the bread and wine.

On the Sunday preceding communion the minister will announce that next Sunday the table will be prepared for communion within the Sunday service. This announcement also includes a call for spiritual preparation for this event and also calls for the congregation members to be present in a large number..

On the day of communion, before the worship service the materials for communion are prepared. Every congregation has its special accessories for this: dishes, plates, trays, cups, decorated tablecloths; in some cases these are valuable historical artifacts several centuries old.

The minister cuts the communion bread in small cubes and places it on the bread trays, the wine is put in the larger cans and cups. All these then go on the table that is in the center of the sanctuary and covered with decorated tablecloths that are used only for these occasions.

In the worship service, after the sermon is given, the minister repeatedly announces the communion, and the name and family who made the donation is also announced. After this, the minister steps to the table and the communion ceremony starts with a short homily that is always based on a reading from the Bible. This is followed and concluded with a prayer.

Those present in the church for communion will then stand around the table in several groups. The minister will first take the bread and then the wine to the members of the congregation. The order of the groups is as follows:

The minister or ministers officiating at the service, the organ player (cantor) and the assistants.

The men of the congregation.

Young men over 14 and not yet married.

The women of the congregation.

Young women over 14.

This specific order comes from our Transylvanian tradition and culture. Wherever this custom is present it is considered natural by everyone, and no one feels oppressed or marginalized by it. There is no sense of discrimination associated with it. It is also connected with another tradition. In a large number of congregations, the women and the men sit in different parts of the sanctuary and the youth sit in the balconies. I repeat this is just how the tradition is. This practice is spontaneous and natural for those doing it. In the congregations where this is present every congregation member feels comfortable and safe within this tradition. In the same way, in other congregations (mostly those in an urban setting) congregants can sit wherever they want to without any tradition connected to order of sitting places in the sanctuary – in the same way in these congregations the communion is also shared in groups that have no specific tradition defining their composition. In these congregations this is the

naturally present tradition and custom.

It is well known that other liberal Protestant communities have different ceremonies, forms and customs, different approaches to communion; I do want to emphasize how important it is to sustain the specific and characteristic values that our Unitarian tradition promotes through our communion service. One of these aspects is connected to sharing the same cup during communion instead of using separate small cups. In our tradition this symbolizes one of the main significances of the act of communion: the feeling of equality and of interconnectedness, the feeling of belonging together.

Part II

I would also like to share with you a few thoughts concerning our Biblical and theological approach to communion.

It was mentioned earlier that in the act of communion we are remembering Jesus. One of the main thoughts and ideas that one could associate with communion is remembrance. It is nothing new to say that in today's society the idea of remembrance is fading in the background and somehow we don't care that much for remembering, for our memories anymore. In a world that is mostly about speed and quickness we are able to find time for mostly anything but remembrance. We say we cannot hang on to the past forever, *there is no time* for that. No time for being nostalgic, life today is not about remembrance, on the contrary it seems to be about being as fast and quick as possible in moving ahead.

Milan Kundera, the Czech writer, has a novel entitled "Slowness." In this work he sees a connection between slowness and remembrance. According to the writer, being slow is connected with remembrance and in the same way being quick and fast is connected with forgetting. I have a feeling that he is right about it. This situation is not only present in your developed society and economy; we also can find it today in our Transylvanian culture in our society where one can still find ancient traditions and customs that are part of our lives and our religious ceremonies.

Be quick, speed up, rush and forget! This is what the motto of our times would sound like. You have to hurry not to be the last one, you have to be quick not to lose a good opportunity, you have to keep the pace, otherwise you will end up being late for everything.

When we are thinking and talking about our churches and about the life of our congregations it is inevitable to ask the question: Do we as a church, as a spiritual community, need to get involved in this race, in this competition against time? Do we have to assist this system of speed and forgetting that seems to be all around us? And we can give the answer easily: No. For it is impossible to pray in a rush. Real deep meditation, true religiousness are hard to reach in this way. One cannot act with love, respect and compassion while being in this constant race, this competition.

We Transylvanian Unitarians are also reminded of all these in the act of communion. We do have to slow down from time to time. We might even have to stop at times in order to find ourselves, to regain the lost balance in our life and to be able to really be in the presence of God and of each other.

The theologian Hans Kung in his book from 1980 entitled "What Is the Church?" gives an answer to the question formulated in the title, and the answer goes like this: "The church in its essence is a table-community that is recreated with every celebration of communion."

Through the stories of the Gospel we often find Jesus in these table-communities. Jesus' table-community is in fact the affirmation of a life-community that crosses all existing borders and segregations with open hearts and open minds. Through all these Jesus has shown us once and for all that seldom do we find ourselves so close to the presence of God, "the kingdom of God," as he called it, as in a beloved table-community, where there is no exclusion, where everyone is accepted.

The Unitarian Church in Transylvania is the community of those willing to follow the teachings and the example of Jesus, of those who think of him as the ideal we follow. Unitarians throughout the centuries – in spite of all oppression and persecution – did stay faithful to this faith of following Jesus.

The Unitarian communion that remembers him, Jesus, thus becomes the continuity in a liturgical form of that table-community which can lift us up to God's presence. This is why we consider this one of our most important liturgical acts. It shows us and reminds us of what each church community is supposed to become: a community where open tables are welcoming everyone and everyone is welcomed in the spirit of love. Amen.