



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL  
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
— Stockbridge, Massachusetts —

## *Authority and Mystery*

**August 4, 2019**

**Text: Colossians 2: 8-10, 16-23**

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.



**Sermon:**

He had served the church for fifty years as a traveling preacher. He had preached in great cathedrals and in small, tiny villages. He had preached in Protestant settings and Catholic settings and some that you couldn't even define. In his fifty years, he had never seen what would happen on a Communion Sunday in rural Maine. He was seated up on the pulpit, and in that church the elements weren't already on the table; they were processed in for Communion. To make sure people remembered what was fully at stake, right before the elements was a giant wooden cross to remind everyone of the context. He sat up there in the chair and watched with some concern, as the man who was carrying it seemed about to tip over with every single step. But he watched as that man came forward with that huge cross, and when he got up about 2/3 of the way up, he suddenly stopped. Then he struggled to take three more steps and finally lifted up that big heavy cross and put it in the right place. Having never

seen anything like this before, the pastor was absolutely dumbfounded; he was searching for what that might have meant, when out of the corner of his eye, he saw a gentleman with a big old smirk on his face, watching him in his confusion. So after he completed the rest of the service, he went over to that gentleman and said, “Friend, I saw you smiling at my discomfort. Can you tell me the story of what is it about bending with the cross and then walking it forward?”

The man said, “Oh, yes, it’s actually quite simple. You see, about thirty years ago our little chapel was falling down. The roof was about ready to cave in, and so what they did is put up a big old beam between the two walls to make sure that the roof wouldn’t fall down. And you see, that beam was so low in this room that you couldn’t get that cross through and so you had to bend over. Since you couldn’t see what you were doing, you had to take about three steps before you lifted it up so you didn’t whack it on the beam again. We finally raised the money to fix the roof, took out the beam, and yet, people seem to think that that whole bending and three step process is part of the sacred liturgy. It’s part of what makes Communion work, and if we don’t do it, people don’t think Communion just happened.”

It’s actually beautiful in a way. It’s touching in a way. I have to admit that when I heard someone tell that story once in a sermon, I was trying to figure out the meaning. Were the three steps the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit? What’s going on? But this is what Paul’s writing about in this part of the letter today. When we human beings come to the workings of the church, and when we come to the shared life—and remember, Paul is totally about this being a fully shared life—that we have to find ways to bring our human meaning into the most important things we do, and yet, Paul would say, ‘Be careful. Be careful never to confuse those things that bring us meaning—those things that bring us comfort or understanding with the things that God is bringing to us—the mystery that lies behind all that we do here. For human wisdom and human practices may in fact be beautiful, and yet behind them there is always the truth of this Communion table.

Now in many of our traditions today, they have grabbed on to a glimpse or particular practice that helps the miracle, the majesty, the humility and the blessing of this meal come to life. If you’ve ever been to a high Anglican service, in the course of getting this meal prepared, the priest goes through multiple costume changes. I don’t say that to belittle it but rather to magnify it. Amidst the incense and the priest’s wardrobe, people realize that what happens at Communion is beyond us. It is all awe and reverence.

If you go to church in Africa, they won’t solemnly process with the elements. Instead, they will come dancing down this aisle. And I don’t just mean the way that we dance during Mardi Gras or even the way we dance at a wedding; they dance with their

whole bodies. They bring everything down, reminding us that at the heart of it is joy that makes your body move. A church in San Francisco took that idea of the African procession but instead of processing the elements, do you know what they do? They process the people. And the people are dancing wildly—it probably helps that it’s San Francisco; it probably helps that they’ve done it over and over again so everybody feels comfortable dancing on their way up.

Each offers us a different glimpse into the meaning of Communion, but there are two examples I want to share with you this morning that really caught my heart this week. One comes from Indonesia. There is a poor church in the middle of the country that serves Communion four times a year. They do partly because they understand that it is special and deserves a time set apart; but I think that the way they do it is amazing. For you see, what Paul writes about in this passage is whether when we look at this meal, we’re looking at the human beauty or at Jesus on the cross. Does this worship experience point us to our beauty or to the beauty of Christ? Jonathan Edwards wrote that. “while nature displays God’s great beauty, Jesus is the most beautiful manifestation of God’s grace in the whole world.”

Before we get back to Indonesia, you need to know that when the Reformers started the Reformation, it almost fell apart because of this very meal. Luther held on very closely to some of the Catholic teachings, believing that Jesus in real ways shows up in this meal. His counterpart Swingley in Switzerland argued, on the other hand, that what has happened has *already* happened. Jesus’ saving act happened, and this is simply a meal of remembrance and celebration of something already done. It’s something to remind us to live in grace. And the two of them were at loggerheads. So in steps John Calvin who tells them both, “We’re so full of sin that we can never fully know what happens in anything we do. And so let us dare not allow our human understanding of what happens in Communion, or how we do it, or what the elements should be made of—come between us and the beauty of Christ revealed at this table.”

That’s what Paul is telling us to do. Grab onto this meal, understand it to the best of our ability, and yet leave room for the beauty of Christ to show up. Here’s how they do it in Indonesia. First, they take all of these pews (which are not bolted to the floor), and they push them out to the sides of the room. Remember, this is a poor country parish. They take a big long wooden table and run it fully down the center aisle and then they run another table fully across in the opposite direction. Then, they pull the pews up to the tables, which now are shaped like a cross. Then they put their best-pressed linens on that table and add the best candles that they have. They set that table in the cross with a feast for the people who come. Make no mistake about it. When you come from your experience of subsistence living, barely making ends meet, and arrive at that church on that day with that cross set out and those tables covered in fine white linen, you spend all of that day remembering what that meal is for. You

understand it is that meal that comes right before the cross. It is a beautiful way of creating a human interpretation of a sacred thing.

Another example I want to tell you about is at an evangelical church in Haiti. At this church people show up and for the first hour, they warm up. They sing and dance and praise God for an hour. Then the preacher comes out and for the next hour, the preacher preaches while the lay leaders and the other pastors prepare the meal right in the middle of the Sanctuary, not in the kitchen but in the Sanctuary itself. That is to show the meal being prepared while the pastor is preaching. That takes about an hour. And then, at the end of that hour, the people are finally invited to come forward. All of them are holding on to their baptism certificates. Baptized into the death and life and resurrection of Christ, they come to this meal to experience the whole miracle. When they get to the font and when they take their bread, and when they drink the drink, they turn around and all the people who had been sitting up at the pulpit are now setting up basins at the back of the church. Everyone who takes Communion then goes to have their feet washed. Why is that? To remember whose table this is and who first washed the disciple's feet so that they might go and do the same.

Paul tells us to be careful that when we put human things on divine sacraments that we might get in the way and yet we are called to do things as beautifully and as openly as we can. If you talk to people who've been to Indonesia or to that church in Haiti, they will tell you that their lives will never be the same. In the Catholic Church every service is a mass. Why is that so? In part, because it includes Communion but that word mass actually comes from a Latin phrase that's used at the end of Communion: dismissal, sending out for a mission. In the Catholic Church, this is all about going out to serve. One more thing: in the Orthodox Church, while Communion is listed as a sacrament, it's officially Mystery. It is something to be done simply to experience the Mystery of it all and let it dwell in your heart. So today when you come forward for Communion, first be open to that Mystery; maybe even use your body in a way that signals that you're open to the Mystery that's going to happen at that table, and then as you head back to your seats, remember the Catholic idea of mission; remember that church in Haiti and imagine your feet getting washed as you go out in service. Things human; things holy—our job is to merge the two and never confuse the two and gradually live from the former into the latter.

Amen.



*The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor*