

**Reflections by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush and Rev. Teresa A. Larson**  
**Text: John 6:51-58; I Corinthians 11:23-28**

**July 13, 2025**



*Milwaukee Art Museum*

*Robert Gober "Untitled" (1997)*

### **Introduction to the theme: The Gift of Communion**

**Dr. Bush**

About 12 times a year, we celebrate the sacrament of communion here at Immanuel. Most are during Sunday worship, but there are also special times like during Holy Week when we gather at the Lord's Table. When you think of communion, what comes to mind? For most of you, it involves something extra added to the worship service, a ritual with an added element of formality and holiness designed to help us remember Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples.

But communion is so much more than a symbolic reenactment of Jesus' Last Supper. Teresa and I could talk at length about its theological meaning, its scriptural foundations, its doctrinal importance – but I'm not sure that will get the information across to you in a meaningful way. So we're going to use two approaches – a series of four reflections on communion as well as the singing of a variety of hymns with a communion theme.

And as a visual aid for this theme, we've included on the front cover of the bulletin a picture of a piece of modern art from the Milwaukee Art Museum by Robert Gober. It is an open suitcase lying on the floor. But if you look closely, there is a grid in the bottom of the suitcase. In the museum, if you stand behind the suitcase and look down through the grid,

you'll see into an actual pool of water, complete with seaweed and seashells and gently rippling waves. And if you look closely at the end of the pool, you'll also see two pairs of legs – a parent and a child – submerged into the water off to the side.

This struck me as a wonderful, artistic metaphor for the fourfold complexity of the sacrament of communion, which Teresa and I will explain more fully. There is communion as a sacrament – a tangible experience, as real as a battered suitcase – something involving bread and wine, a plate and a cup you hold and pass around. Second, there is communion as a time of unity with Christ. In Gober's sculpture, you become part of the art itself, connected to the world he created.

Third, there is communion as a sacrament of fellowship – coming together at the table of Christ, sharing bread and juice with friend and stranger alike. In the artwork, you glimpse two pairs of legs in the water that belong to someone else – someone unknown to you but connected to you, a part of the lived experience. Finally, fourth, there is communion as a glimpse into the future kingdom of God – a future reality that is different, more wonderful than our current world. Gober takes the literal experience of standing in a single room of an art museum and invites you to imagine another world connected to this one – allowing another dimension or spiritual reality to unfold before our eyes.

Teresa and I will explore those four aspects of communion today – communion as sacrament, as union with Christ, as fellowship with God's children, as a glimpse of the future banquets in the kingdom of God. Together we will talk and sing about these themes that are so important to our faith.

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Communion-themed hymns sung during worship

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Beginning of worship	494 Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts
After first reflection	202 An Upper Room Did Our Lord Prepare
After second reflection	500 Be Known to Us in Breaking Bread
After second reflection	525 Let Us Break Bread Together
After third reflection	515 I Come With Joy
After fourth reflection	526 Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ

Pop quiz: how many sacraments does the Presbyterian Church USA recognize?

The correct answer is two: baptism and communion. Our denomination's *Directory for Worship* says that "sacraments are the Word of God enacted and sealed in the life of the Church, the body Christ." They are gracious acts of God, and "human acts of gratitude by which we offer our lives to God in love and sacrifice." Sacraments employ ordinary things – water, bread, and wine – in proclaiming the extraordinary love of God.

So what makes something a sacrament? There are ordinary things all around us...plants, animals, to-lists and with ordinary daily tasks, a battered suitcase. Is there a way to make these ordinary things sacramental? Why do bread, wine, and water get to have all the fun?

There are two qualifiers to make something a sacrament. First, sacraments are actions instituted by Jesus. Second, the sacraments have been sustained in practice through the history of the universal Church. You can go to any church in the world or consider any church throughout history and know that baptism and communion have been celebrated in that community.

Communion as a sacrament is a meal shared with fellow disciples in which the presence of Christ is made known. A clear example of this is the story of the Emmaus Road. In the evening of Easter day, two disciples met a stranger while they were walking along and were only able to recognize that the stranger was Jesus when they invited him for a meal and he broke bread with them.

Communion is divine assurance of God's love for all of creation; God's sustaining grace is offered to all people. The sacrament washes us with a grace that nourishes us to carry out the redeeming work of God that all are invited to participate in. There is room at the table for everyone. That's why, in fact, our own communion table is pulled out from the chancel – it is a representation of our conviction that there is room for everyone to gather together. Communion is a gift made known to us through Christ, so that we may know Christ, and is for anyone who desires to share in a life of faithful discipleship together.

## Second Reflection: Communion as Union with Christ

Dr. Bush

Teresa spoke about communion as a sacrament – sharing the bread and cup as a reenactment of what happened at Jesus' Last Supper. Based on the description given to us by the apostle Paul, we recreate that scene in church. We repeat the gestures and words offered by Christ as he shared the meal with his disciples. This holy act allows us to imagine what it might have been like to be in Christ's presence and to receive the two elements from his hand.

But if communion is only a reenactment, it could feel like we are watching a drama unfold on a stage – a church play being acted out by the ministers in the sanctuary. Yes, plays can be meaningful and powerful to watch. But if you see the same play over and over again, at some point it stops being special and can feel routine or uninspired.

That is why we speak of communion, not only as a sacrament of the church, but also as an act of union with Jesus Christ. We are not just remembering what Jesus did; we are also participating in a ritual that literally unites us with him. This is critically important for us. Faith is not just believing certain doctrines and teachings. Faith is opening ourselves up to actual encounters with God – stepping into experiences of oneness with God revealed as Creator, Savior, and Holy Spirit.

At the end of my remarks, we'll sing a short hymn whose opening words capture this idea. The text goes like this: *Be known to us in breaking bread, but do not then depart; Savior abide with us and spread your table in our heart.* It is a hymn asking Christ to remain with us, to literally abide within us, as if Christ's own communion table was set up in our hearts. Yes, this language is a metaphor. There's not a real table inside our cardiac chambers. But in other ways, it is more than a metaphor. It reminds us that there is a connection we strive for in our relationship with God – a connection uniting the physical and the spiritual, a movement toward God that helps us transcend our realities of flesh and blood.

We believe something happens in communion that has the potential to open us up to a real union with the resurrected Lord. It is a holy act, a spirit-filled sacrament, that unfolds right here in the midst of our unholy and less-than-spiritual world. The theologian Martin Buber said it quite well: *Only where the sublime stronghold of the individual is unbolted can the divine enter our lives.* That's a great image. Only where the stronghold of the individual is "unbolted" – opened up, like the gates of a fortress being swung wide – can the divine enter in. When we let down our guard and imagine Christ as the living host of the communion meal, our ego steps to one side. Our gates are unlocked. The divine can enter in. And in that moment, a unity happens. We become something more through that communion meal than we could ever be without it.

One last detail: Remember how in the communion liturgy, a minister says "This is my body given for you" while holding up a piece of bread? We usually assume Jesus' words refer to the bread itself – that it is now the body of Christ. But that is not the only way to understand this phrase. The full liturgy says that Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it

to his disciples, saying “Take, eat, this is my body given for you.” The pronoun “this” could also refer to the act of breaking and sharing bread – so that the act of sharing bread with others, with those who are hungry or in need, is literally what it means to be the body of Christ in the world. “This is my body”: not in some element of wheat and flour but in the act of showing mercy and hospitality to others. When we do such things, we are one with Christ.

So communion is a sacramental remembrance of Jesus’ Last Supper. And it is a ritual that opens us up to a mystical union with Christ. But there is more to be explored about this sacrament – how it is a time of fellowship with others as well as a glimpse of God’s kingdom of peace yet to come. We’ll talk about those in a moment, but first, let’s sing two communion hymns.

### **Third Reflection: Communion as Fellowship with Others    Rev. Larson**

I wonder if you can recall your most memorable experiences of celebrating communion... a few come to mind for me. I recall taking communion in the small Presbyterian church where I grew up and with over 1,200 people at national denominational gatherings, celebrating the sacrament during summer camp around the campfire and on mission trips after a long day on a work site. My most memorable experience of communion was with my former youth group on the Isle of Iona, off the coast of Scotland. Iona is where some of Christianity's roots run the deepest and is a popular destination for many Christians who come to experience "a thin place"; to savor the rich church history and spirituality of a sacred place.

Our group had made friends with one of the residents of the island who got us into one of the small stone chapels off of the main abbey for our final night of the trip and a closing worship service. As we sang hymns, read liturgy, and celebrated the sacrament, I thought of all the others who had done the same thing in that space for hundreds of years...sang the same songs, prayed the same prayers, shared the same simple elements of bread and wine. In sharing the sacrament, we were connected to the fellowship of all those who had done exactly what we had done since the church's inception. We were fed, nourished, and sent together into the world.

The place for that celebration of communion was so special and sacred...but it wasn't the space that made the experience sacred; it was sharing that sacrament with that particular group of people. Those gathered that night gave a glimpse into the diversity of God's people. Our group composed of teenagers from the suburbs of Lansing, Michigan, refugees from Myanmar, immigrants from Columbia, adults who took time away from their various jobs to chaperone the trip, and a Scotland native. That exact group of people will never again gather in that exact place, under the same set of circumstances. The fellowship we shared was sacred.

This is true for nearly every celebration of communion. No celebration is ever the same. We change, the world around us changes, but the sacrament does not; the fellowship we share around the sacrament is what holds us, the people of God, together, and is what sustains us as members of the body of Christ.

#### Fourth Reflection: Communion as Foretaste of Future

Dr. Bush

Let's go back to the Robert Gober sculpture that is shown on the cover of today's worship bulletin. I mentioned earlier how this artwork is a helpful metaphor when considering the various meanings of the Lord's Supper. Communion is a sacrament of bread and wine – tangible objects you can hold in your hands just like Gober's suitcase is a tactile, tangible object. Second, communion involves union with Christ. In a similar way, there are instructions on the floor behind the sculpture that tell you where to stand in order to best view the artwork and thus become part of the art experience. Third, sharing a communion meal or standing beside other people in the art museum is an act of community and fellowship.

But what I like best about Gober's sculpture is what happens when you look into the suitcase itself. When you stand behind the open lid and look down, you glance through a hole in the floor to a pool of water below it – a pool complete with seaweed, shells and rippling water; a pool that lets you glimpse submerged feet of a parent and child playing in this water. It imaginatively takes you from one world into another different one. It expands your vision and forces you to ask, "How are both these realities possible?" That question is actually a faith question: How do I reconcile the world I see around me every day with the world of hope, peace and love as described for me in the bible?

Let's start with what we see in the world around us. A couple years ago, Rob Dunn wrote a book called "A Natural History of the Future: What the Laws of Biology Tell Us About the Destiny of the Human Species." Dunn's central premise is that nature is not static. It is constantly on the move, especially reacting to the many ways humans try to control nature. You can spray pesticides over your garden and you'll kill some weeds, but you'll also cause new strains of pesticide-resistant weeds to sprout up. Chlorinating your water will kill most parasites, but it also causes chlorine-resistant bacteria to evolve. Build massive cities of steel, glass and concrete? Fine, but don't be surprised when these places become home for urban-adapted mice, pigeons, and disease. In fact, there are now types of mosquitoes that only live in the London metro.

Nature is never passive. It is active and unrelentingly forceful, as the tragic recent flooding disaster in Texas reminds us. As further proof of this, there was an experiment done by researchers at Harvard in which E. coli bacteria was made to grow across a giant Petri dish, one that was partitioned into sections laced with increasingly lethal doses of antibiotics. The antibiotic levels increased until the final section of the dish contained antibiotics thousands of times stronger than that which can kill a typical E. coli strain. Even so, the bacteria rapidly evolved and mutated and developed ways to resist the antibiotics, jumping over the barriers even to the impossibly lethal section of the Petri dish. What's most unsettling about this experiment is that the bacteria conquered every barrier in only 10 days.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *New York Times Book Review*, "Laws of Nature" by Peter Brannen, 12/26/2021

Nature can provide us things of beauty and wonder, but we do not live in the Garden of Eden anymore. Nature cannot provide the examples we need to feel truly hopeful about the future. So where else can we look? Can humans be the source of lasting hope? Human society has created great works of art, literature and music and made amazing advances in medicine, engineering, and technology. But humans have also given us Hiroshima and napalm, drone warfare and cyber-attacks. It has given us politics built upon violence, power, greed - all of the above. Humanism itself cannot inspire us to create a better future. To get where we hope to go, we need a different vision - a vision that is God-given, holy, and sacramental.

The Guber artwork asks us to imagine a world where a suitcase is a window into another reality, a place of beauty, wonder, and fellowship. In the same way, communion gives us a foretaste of the future. It models for us a world in which nourishment is given regardless of status or wealth. A world in which we unlock our egos and join Christ at a sacred table. A world where we find ourselves next to people different from us yet one with us in faith - people with whom we share a meal - people who pray for us as we pray for them - people whose future is just as important as our own future - people who are children of God just like us.

God knows you cannot become what you cannot imagine. God's love is revealed in the act of opening our eyes to what is truly possible, doing so through a simple communion meal.

The last hymn we'll sing is "Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ." The chorus joyfully announces, "Jesus lives again - earth can breathe again - pass the Word around: loaves abound." Every time we share communion, we remember this good news. The good news that Christ is alive. That the earth is the Lord's and a potential blessing for all. And by God's grace, there is enough for all - loaves abound.

Ultimately, every meal is a communion meal. Every meal is a sacrament, a moment of spiritual union, a time of fellowship, and a glimpse of the future. Believe this good news. And for this and so much more, thanks be to God!