

I visited a church this past spring, where I was guest speaking. It wasn't a Quaker meeting, but there was a Quaker meeting in the same city and one of its members had e-mailed me to say about a dozen of them would be attending the church where I was speaking. I was looking forward to meeting them, several of them were Facebook Friends, and it's always fun to put faces to names.

When I arrived at the church that morning, I was escorted to the sacristy to be with the priest and his assistant, who were putting on their robes. We introduced ourselves, went over the worship service, then the priest pointed to a robe hanging on a hook and asked if I would wear it while I preached.

I said, "No thank you. Quakers don't wear liturgical garb."

I am generally supportive of St. Ambrose's advice, "When in Rome, do as the Romans," but I knew if I walked out in the church wearing a robe, I'd never hear the end of it from those dozen other Quakers.

Then the priest, who was a very nice man, said, "Oh, I understand. Well, perhaps you can help me serve communion."

His assistant, who had apparently taken a class in comparative religions, said, "They don't do communion, either."

The priest looked at me and asked, "What do you do Quakers do?"

I said, "We're good with silence. We've got that down pat. We can be silent for hours at a time. Doesn't bother us a bit."

So we processed out, the organ was playing, them in their robes, me in my funeral suit, and worship began. We sang, then the priest asked if anyone had anything they wanted to share and a woman stood and talked about how her husband had passed away the month before and how kind the church had been to her, and how grateful she was. She began weeping, and people went and sat with her and hugged her. It made me feel wonderful to be part of the church. Then the assistant read the Scripture, I preached, and the priest got ready to serve communion. I watched the Quakers to see if they would take communion. There are purist Quakers who won't be caught anywhere near bread and wine during worship. I suspected they fell in that camp, and I was right. They didn't take it, and were watching me to see if I would. The rats. I knew what they were thinking. "Don't you take that communion." But I got to thinking about that woman whose husband had died and how people had responded so kindly to her pain and thought, "What's that, if not communion?" So I started feeling all communiony and got right up out of my chair, stood in line, and took communion. And I looked at those Quakers the whole time I was doing it.

Driving home, I got to thinking about what the assistant had said, that Quakers don't do communion, and how mistaken he was. We may not do bread and wine, but we do communion. We do have this deep, inward connection, this communion, with God and with one another in our silence. At least this is our goal. But we do communion other times, too.

We do communion every time we reach out to someone who is hurting.

We do communion every time we encourage someone who is discouraged.

We do communion every time we love instead of hate.

We don't need bread and wine to have communion.

We have communion every time we follow the way of Jesus.

How often do you have communion?

If you only have communion once a week, or once a month, or at Easter and Christmas, well, you might want to think about that. So when I was remembering what that assistant said, that Quakers don't do communion, I thought, "Well, maybe some Quakers don't." But I've known Quakers who live in a constant state of communion. I've known Methodists and Catholics and Baptists and Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists who live in a constant state of communion.

When I was growing up in the church, I believed communion happened once a week, using bread and wine blessed by the priest. Now I believe communion is a state, a condition, we can live in. We live in this state, this condition, whenever and wherever we have intimacy with God. In the Old Testament, in the Song of Solomon, there's all this sensual imagery, and people read it and think it's about a bride and a groom. But it's an allegory about communion, about intimacy between God and humanity.

We Christians didn't invent communion. Jesus didn't invent it at the Last Supper. Communion has been with us since the first people reached out in kindness to one another, since God reached out in kindness to them. One of the more breathtaking images of communion in the Bible is in the 23rd Psalm, which we read at funerals thinking it's about death, but it's really about communion and what is possible when we practice communion. Listen to this psalm and hear it as a song of communion, as a song of belonging and loving and caring.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies, thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

That's a psalm about communion. And listen to this: Communion is so powerful, so redemptive, that you can be lying down in green pastures, and God is preparing a feast for you, and not just you, but preparing it for you in the presence of your enemies. They're right there, too. They're your enemies, but they're God's children, so he's preparing the feast for them too, because

when God makes a feast, everyone's invited. So you're there with your enemies, and you're safe and you're loved. Because in true communion, our enemies become our friends. So we don't have to go through life looking over our shoulders at our enemies. Instead, we can lie down in green pastures beside still waters, fearing no evil, for God is with us.

Friends, how often do you have communion?