

---

# Christ is Present in Ordinary Things

---

Manuel J. Retamoza, Senior Pastor

Sarah Sumner-Eisenbraun, Pastor

*St. Andrew's Lutheran Church  
San Diego, California*

## Christ Is Present At Home

At the very beginning of the pandemic, we developed a phrase that we would often return to as pastors, a phrase that we would repeat every week as we struggled to figure out how to put together live-stream worship services, a phrase that grounded us in the vastness and also the simplicity of God's promises during a very difficult and complicated time:

*We believe that Christ is present and comes to us in ordinary things.*

Every week we repeated this phrase when it came time to celebrate communion in the empty and quiet sanctuary. While all the rest of the vibrant and busy life of the congregation's campus where we serve, St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in San Diego, came to a screeching halt, this promise of the accessibility of Christ's presence was an anchor, a source of comfort and hope: "We are together in faith, hope, and prayer," we repeated. *We believe that Christ is present and comes to us in ordinary things.* We invoked the communion blessing that had always been declared at St. Andrew's as people gathered around the table and held hands in a circle after receiving their small piece of Hawaiian bread and sweet wine: *May the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ strengthen you and keep you in his grace, amen.*

While many church leaders, bishops, and theologians began having discussions and debates about the theological and pedagogical implications of "virtual communion," we as pastors at St. Andrew's never stopped to ask or reflect on whether or not communion would be included in the worship services that we streamed live over social media. We believed that Christ was present and we encouraged people to practice their faith in their homes, whether they were alone or lived with others. In the office the staff prepared small paper bags that we filled with pre-packaged communion kits we already had on hand and set them out on the ledge by the office door, the receiver's name spelled out in black marker. It wasn't Hawaiian bread, but that paper-thin wafer and thick "juice" represented something important.

After a few weeks, some folks started feeling more comfortable with the idea that they could use their own bread or crackers and juice or wine for communion at home during the low-tech

---

While all the rest of the vibrant and busy life of the congregation's campus where we serve, St. Andrew's Lutheran Church in San Diego, came to a screeching halt, this promise of the accessibility of Christ's presence was an anchor, a source of comfort and hope: "We are together in faith, hope, and prayer," we repeated.

---

services we live-streamed using a laptop and a webcam. Others preferred the pre-packaged kits. We encouraged people to participate in the chat during the service and send in pictures of their "house churches." We noticed that we were starting to get friends and family members from all over the world joining us online for worship together, including a family who was spread out between San Diego, Turkey, and Australia.

One family with three preteen/teenage children set up their own home altar space for worship each weekend, and their eldest daughter liked to act as presider. As we would say the words of institution over the live stream, she would stand behind the table that held the elements in their living room and say them along with us, having memorized them as a child. Before the pandemic, she would often quietly whisper them as she stood next to us at the table when she served as acolyte. Sometimes her younger sister would take a turn too. It was inspiring to both of us as pastors to see that this practice continued at home—a significant reminder of how transcendent the words of the liturgy can be.

Thinking back on these stories, it begs the question: why would we want to put boundaries or limitations on the promise of Christ's presence in the meal? As Martin Luther himself wrote,

Christ with all saints, by his love, takes upon himself our form (Phil. 2:7), fights with us against sin, death, and all evil. This enkindles in us such love that we take on his form, rely upon his righteousness, life, and blessedness. And through the interchange of his blessings and our misfortunes, we become one loaf, one bread, one body, one drink, and have all things in common. O this is a great sacrament, says St. Paul, that Christ and the church are one flesh and bone. Again through this same love, we are to be changed and to make the infirmities of all other Christians our own; we are to take upon ourselves their form and their necessity, and all the good that is within our power we are to make theirs, that they may profit from it. That is real fellowship, and that is the true significance of this sacrament. In this way we are changed into one another and are made into a community by love. Without love there can be no such change.<sup>1</sup>

Christ is present in the sacrament, in these common elements of bread and wine, whether or not we believe or even recognize that presence.

1. Jari Jolkkonen. "Luther on the Eucharist — Doctrine and Practice." Piispa Jari Jolkkonen. November 1, 2022. [https://www.piiispajarijolkkonen.fi/puheet/luther-on-the-eucharist-doctrine-and-practice/#\\_ftnref11](https://www.piiispajarijolkkonen.fi/puheet/luther-on-the-eucharist-doctrine-and-practice/#_ftnref11), accessed.

## Christ Is Present At The Border

Fast forward to the summer of 2022, after years of closures and inconsistencies attributed to the danger of COVID-19, the gate to the U.S. side of Friendship Park along the San Diego-Tijuana border reopened quietly and without ceremony.

A little bit of background information: Friendship Park/El Parque de la Amistad is a bi-national park, set along the Pacific Coastline about six miles west of the San Ysidro Port of Entry, the busiest border crossing in the world. On the Tijuana side of this section of the border, the border wall is the backyard of many family homes and small businesses, with big sections covered in colorful paintings and murals.

However, the U.S. side of the border is mostly open land, with occasional smatterings of industrial parks and the dirt trails used by Customs and Border Patrol (CPB). Where the border wall drops into the Pacific Ocean, there is this beachfront park, Friendship Park, established fifty years ago when former first lady Pat Nixon inaugurated the park in celebration of the friendship between the U.S. and Mexico. Mrs. Nixon was heard to say that day at the park, "I hope there won't be a fence too long here." She then asked that the wire be cut so she could walk into Mexico and greet people. Although not mentioned in any articles, she may have also wanted to visit a taco stand to get some TJ Playas tacos.

Over the last fifty years, locals have witnessed this boundary at the coast change significantly. Years ago, it was just barbed wire; then in the 1980s our government changed the boundary from barbed wire to a chain link fence which remained until 2005.





During this period, families separated by our international border were able to visit with one another, hug over the barbed wire, and then in later years touch each other's fingers through the chain link fence. Gifts could be exchanged through and over the fence under the ever-watchful eye of the border patrol.

I (*Manuel*) remember when I first moved to San Diego in 2004, I was able to buy tacos and popsicles for myself and my two kids through the fence from vendors. That changed quickly, and the restrictions have only continued to increase.

During the pandemic, Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) effectively closed the border completely, including the mile-long walking path leading to Friendship Park. So, we were particularly excited when we received an email in August 2022 from Border Church/La Iglesia Frontera stating that they would gather again to resume their Binational Communion Services at the border wall in Friendship Park. We gathered some of our high school youth and a few adults from St. Andrew's who were interested and headed south after worship to meet up with the Border Church community on the U.S. side.

According to their website, "The Border Church / La Iglesia Fronteriza is a nonsectarian Christian ministry centered in the celebration of open-table communion on the U.S.-Mexico border. Since November 2011, people from both the United States and Mexico have gathered each Sunday afternoon to share communion at Friendship Park, the historic border meeting place at the western edge of the border, overlooking the Pacific Ocean."<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, this worshiping body has used different technology to commune together in, through, and over the border wall, and across two languages. Sometimes they simply used a megaphone and an amp. But like most churches during the pandemic, the leadership of the Border Church began to make more use of Facebook Live and Zoom to create virtual spaces that helped to connect those who had been separated.

On the Sunday afternoon that we joined them for worship, the preacher was on the U.S. side, and the band and presider were on the Tijuana side. When it came time for communion, there was one presider, one table, one meal and the words and prayers were amplified using a cell phone hooked up to a microphone and also the live stream on social media. Then the preacher invited us



---

A few of our young people expressed that communion with Border Church felt different. This time they knew there were people, fellow members of the body of Christ, on the other side of the wall having communion at the same time.

---

to serve the bread and juice to those around our half of the circle, while those on the other side of the wall were being served simultaneously. After the meal, we walked a few hundred feet inland to the portion of the wall that allowed us to be able to see each other waving and hear each other shouting words of peace and prayers.

Just weeks earlier, we had been to this exact same spot with our high school youth as a part of an overnight camping retreat. We hiked along the path to Friendship Park, picking up trash and other debris, which sometimes included discarded clothes and shoes. When we got to the coastline, we celebrated communion there too, but a few of our young people expressed that communion with Border Church felt different. This time they knew there were people, fellow members of the body of Christ, on the other side of the wall having communion at the same time, even though the only way we could see their faces was through the live stream on our phones.

Later as a group we reflected together on Paul's words to the church in Rome:

"What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not

---

2. <https://www.friendshippark.org/borderchurch>, accessed November 1, 2022



spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

*“For your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39, NIV).

While the border wall is a boundary that is created and maintained by our human institutions, the words and promise of Christ’s presence continues to be a source of transcendence and hope that there is more to this world than just our present

While the border wall is a boundary that is created and maintained by our human institutions, the words and promise of Christ’s presence continues to be a source of transcendence and hope that there is more to this world than just our present struggles. These intangible promises become something we can see, taste, touch and receive in communion.

struggles. These intangible promises become something we can see, taste, touch and receive in communion.

### **Christ Is Present In Community**

At St. Andrew’s, we have decided to continue providing a live stream of our worship services, hoping that we can still foster community even amongst those who cannot be physically present in



the room. These decisions about how to incorporate a live stream as a permanent part of our worship life have been and continue to be a complicated and sacred struggle, balancing being hospitable and accessible while also considering privacy.

There is one couple, Fred and Nancy, who remain severely restricted because of the ongoing risk of exposure to COVID-19. Both Fred and Nancy are recent organ donation recipients on medications that suppress their immune systems. Fred received a new heart and not long after Nancy received a new kidney. Even with all of the vaccines and booster shots, it is still considered medically unwise for them to risk exposure. They are especially aware of the fact that their lives were saved because of the bodily sacrifice of someone else. It's not something they take lightly. So, while most of our life together as a church has returned to practices that resemble the way things looked "before," our decision to no longer require masks and to drop a lot of the other precautions we were taking at the height of the virus means that they cannot attend worship in the sanctuary. The live stream remains a primary way they stay connected to their church and practice their faith, especially communion.

During Lent in 2021, we focused as a church on food and hunger, using the symbol of manna in the wilderness. During our midweek services, representatives from local organizations that provide food or meals for those experiencing food insecurity served as guest speakers. Then on the weekends, we asked congregation members to bake fresh bread for communion. Each baker was asked to choose a recipe that was meaningful for them, share the recipe, and then also provide a short devotion about their bread that we shared on the social media pages of St. Andrew's. Our thinking was that people who can't be with us in person could try out the recipes and use the same communion bread at home. Each baker shared deep stories about the bread that they chose to bake and what communion means to them. One of the members we asked to bake bread was Fred. He provided three beautiful loaves of sourdough bread for our worship and kept one for him and his wife for their worship at home. Here is an excerpt from what he wrote (*shared with permission*):

We moved to San Diego in the summer of 1998, and shortly thereafter we joined St. Andrew's. Pastor Phil had recently retired as Pastor, although he was still working part-time as Pastor Emeritus. That fall, he asked me about being a Christ Bearer, someone who brings communion to home-bound members. I told him that was not something I was comfortable doing but never explained why. I was brought up in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a conservative branch of Lutheranism, and not being an ordained pastor, I didn't feel holy or worthy enough to bring the sacrament of communion to others. However, over the years I've begun to understand and accept that God works through all of us, not only pastors, to serve and minister to others, and that my self-perceived lack of worthiness should not keep me from assisting in giving communion.

Like so many for unexplained reasons, I began baking lots of sourdough bread early during the Covid pandemic. When asked to provide bread [for communion], my selection was unquestionably going to be some type of sourdough. While I know that the bread I made... is itself not holy, after consecration by God it becomes holy and worthy of being used as bread in communion. Although I still have not accepted Pastor Phil's original offer to serve as a Christ Bearer, I offer this loaf in that spirit.

In all these stories the altar of communion is not within the four walls of any sanctuary, but they are still sacred spaces. It is in the eating and drinking and hearing of these words, "this is my body, given for you" that Christ's promises become incarnate. In our biblical witness, the disciples never seem to return to the upper room to venerate or memorialize the room where that last supper took place. The upper room didn't become the holy of holies for these followers of Christ seeking to continue Jesus' teachings and ministry. Communion became a sign of Christian communities wherever they gathered, making holy people, holy things, and holy places.

The gift and meaning of this Eucharistic meal has remained the same for two millennia. However, the tangible, earthly ingredients have been changed by geography and the culture. We don't eat the same wheat-based or grape-based fluid. What remains the same is the promise of Christ's presence in these ordinary things that we encounter everyday, things that don't require a lot of funds or insider knowledge but the simplest of substance made sacred, holy, and communal in the words "Do this in remembrance of me."



**While I know that the bread I made  
... is itself not holy, after  
consecration by God it becomes holy  
and worthy of being used as bread in  
communion.**