

World Communion Sunday
Sharing the Good News
Psalm 33
Mark 10:2-16

Today is World Communion Sunday. It offers congregations a distinctive opportunity to experience Holy Communion in the context of the global community of faith. This Sunday has become a time when Christians in every culture break bread and pour the cup to remember and affirm Christ as the Head of the Church. We remember that we are part of the whole body of believers. Whether shared in a grand cathedral, a mud hut, outside on a hilltop, in a meeting house, or in a store-front, Christians celebrate communion in as many ways as there are congregations. It is not just a time to feel good about our faith, it is not just a safe way to worship Christ, and feel good about our connection with others throughout the world.

There have always been differences in the church. Issues of who should belong, who did what, who had power, what was true doctrine. There a major dispute between Peter and Paul about whether or not you had to be Jewish in order to be a Christian, in fact they never really became friends, they were only united by their commitment to the gospel and the need to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

While Peter reached out to the Jewish community, Paul branched out to those who were considered pagans. As Gentiles began to convert from paganism to Christianity, a dispute arose among Christian leaders as to whether or not Gentiles needed to observe all the tenets of Jewish law. In particular, it was debated whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised or observe the dietary laws; circumcision especially being considered repulsive in the cultures outside of Israel.

Later the differences and dissensions were so severe that there were fights between sects, some resulting in death. It was because of these circumstances that Emperor Constantine forced the most important bishops to convene at Nicea and write what has become the first creed that set out basic tenets of the faith. Interestingly Constantine sat with the bishops to make sure that things progressed decently and in order, can you imagine the chaos if he wasn't there.

This Sunday marks a time when we celebrate our faith in Christ Jesus, to rejoice in what unites instead of dwell on what divides us. All too often we try to suppress other groups from going forth on their own, especially when they have originally been in mission fields.

When I came back to seminary from Arizona, I was very angry and was seriously considering not only giving up on ministry, but leaving the church altogether. Two things happened that not only affirmed my desire to recommit myself to ministry, but also to commit myself to the Presbyterian Church.

First, the Field Education director really heard my anger and frustration and placed me in a field education position that helped me to see how I could be not only a positive force in ministry, but it allowed me to start to see ways that I fit in the flawed, for after all, all human institutions are flawed, it is the structure of our denomination.

The second thing that saved me was that I loved to take summer courses, and the Spirit allowed me to accidentally find two courses taught by a man named M. M. Thomas. Dr. Thomas had been a founder of the Church of South India, and was a member of the World Council of Churches. He spoke of how Methodist missionaries had brought the gospel message to that part of India, and what an impact this had had on the people.

But when the people decided that they wanted to start their own denomination, the missionaries were appalled and didn't want to give up their leadership, and perhaps even their control, of the faith community. They said that the people were not ready to go out on their own. Needless to say, the people did go out on their own. They crafted the faith that had been shared with them into something that was their own, they shared with one another as equals, no longer the ones who needed to be taken care of. Just as importantly they shared their experiences, their practices, their journeys of faith stories, and their hopes with the rest of the faithful throughout the world.

In this regard I would like to explore what it means to share in the gospel message. First, we can celebrate the joy that many Christians have, especially in areas that either establish their faith communities, or who are turning to joyously worship Christ in ways that distinguish them from denominations that had tried to instill boring and tedious worship services. We need to find the vitality and excitement that often flows from these churches, even if we may not necessarily agree with all the tenets of their congregations or the governing bodies that unite these congregations.

Second, we share a faith that has evolved in so many ways throughout the existence of a relationship of God and the people. When Abraham dealt with God, the faith was basically a nomadic existence. Moses showed the people the saving power of God, and by the time of David, there was a developed, organized celebration of God's presence with the people. In the Christian Church there were many ways the faith was used in different periods of history; from the persecution and uncertainty of the early church, to its being recognized as the official religion by Constantine, to the reformation, to the many offshoot denominations.

Even within the Presbyterian Church we have evolved from a dour, strict type of belief to one where people can dance to all kinds of music, where cards can be played on the Sabbath, women can be ordained, and LGBT folks can now be open in their faith. With each change there have been difficulties, but also there have been new ways of experiencing what it means to be Christians. So it is as we experience the faith stories and celebrations of others, those near to us, and those in places far away.

Third, we can share in the pain and persecution of other Christians. This happens in so many ways. We comfort, stand by, and pray with those we know who are in any kind of pain, desperation, despair, or grief. We hold up in our prayers not just those in our lives and in our communities, but those from around the world. Those who have experienced the horror of natural disasters, those who face political persecution, those who risk their lives for the very faith they hold so dear.

We have followed the stories of ISIS taking Christians hostage, probably with the intention of killing them. We listen to the stories of persecution in places like the Sudan. We know of wars fought over religion in places like Yugoslavia, Cambodia, and too many other places within our lifetimes. We must know of places like China where faith is practiced in secret because the government has outlawed the practice of religion due to the fear it could be subversive. Closer to home we have the shooting at the community college in Oregon, where Christians were targeted to be killed. We must recognize in our hearts as well as our minds the struggle in so many places to practice and follow the faith of Christ.

Today we celebrate our faith with Christians all over the world. We share the simple elements of bread and wine, things present in all nations and cultures, in remembrance of that night so long

ago that Jesus shared them with his disciples. With the sharing of the elements we are renewed to go out and live our faith in the world, as individuals and as the body of Christ where ever Christians are gathered. We uphold our commitment to follow Jesus' words and actions toward all people, especially those who struggle to live out the good news of the gospel.

All too often we let our differences and divisions define who we think we are as Christians rather than acknowledging what unites us, mainly our deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ. When it suits us we congratulate ourselves on giving to others in need, and in so doing we feel better about how we are living out our faith. Yet we often do this without really thinking about the true needs of others. We practice a comfortable kind of faith ignoring not only Jesus' words, but the reality of what it means to live out the faith in other ways. Let us work to open ourselves up to Christians joys, fears, and uncertainty. Let us see the positive aspects of opening ourselves to new ways to worship and express our faith. Let us see our faith as something that brings vitality and meaning to our lives and our relationships with others. Let us praise and worship Christ with the whole body of believers, not just today but everyday.

Our time at the Lord's Table call us to a different way of living; a way that rises above all hatred and division, a way of peace and unity, a way of grace and love that reflects the very love of Jesus Christ, himself, this is the significance of World Communion.
