

The Table's Bigger Than We Realized

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
October 7, 2018—World Communion Sunday

- Psalm 133 Good News Translation ¹How wonderful it is, how pleasant, for God's people to live together in harmony!
- Ephesians 2:14-22 Good News Translation ¹⁷So Christ came and preached the Good News of peace to all—to you Gentiles, who were far away from God, and to the Jews, who were near to him. ¹⁸It is through Christ that all of us, Jews and Gentiles, are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father. ¹⁹So then, you Gentiles are not foreigners or strangers any longer; you are now citizens together with God's people and members of the family of God.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: World Communion Sunday encourages us to remember and cherish our unity in Christ.

It began last night, as you were going to bed: World Communion Sunday.

Asian Christians shared the bread and the wine. Churches in China met in secret so that they would not be arrested. Christians in the Middle East... met under the watchful eye of the government as they celebrated the Eucharist. In Europe, Christians gathered in churches that used to be much fuller and celebrated the Lord's Supper. In Africa the sacrament was celebrated in great numbers by a growing number of Christians, many of whom [carry] scars of persecution as they commune together.

Those celebrating today include Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholics, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Baptists, thousands of other denominations, and even those without denominations.

Christ-followers are meeting both in public and in secret. Some meet in freedom while others gather under threat of persecution and death. Some take the sacrament today with organ music, others with simple singing, and still others in quiet so as not to be arrested.

In wealthy churches and in desperate poverty the sacrament is observed. In churches, homes, huts, and in God's Creation this seal of the covenant is experienced. The bread is given to people that could overeat all day and to people who had no idea what they would eat or where they would get it today.

The one thing in common: we all come to the same table of our Lord.¹

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World Communion Sunday has been especially meaningful to me since my freshman year in college. My missionary family was still living in Indonesia 12,000 miles away. That wasn't all bad, but I did think about them as the pastor guided our thoughts on that World Communion Sunday. I also thought about my international school classmates who, like me, had dispersed around the world after high school graduation, returning to their home countries of Burma, Sweden, South Korea, Hungary, England, Argentina, Italy, Australia... and Texas (trust me, my Texas classmates acted as though the Lone Star State is its own country!).

World Communion Sunday actually was conceived by a Presbyterian minister at Pittsburgh's huge and lavish Shadyside Presbyterian Church. According to *Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, the Rev. Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr first conceived the notion during his year as moderator of the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly (1930). In 1933 Shadyside launched World Communion Sunday as its attempt to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity—in which everyone might receive both

¹ <http://www.jordanrimmer.com/world-communion-sunday-ideas-and-liturgy/> accessed 10/3/2018, modified for clarity

inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is interconnected one with another. The entire Presbyterian Church began supporting World Communion Sunday in 1936, and in the years following, other denominations joined in and the movement spread around the world.²

But hold on, says Debra Dean Murphy. She is a professor and church educator who has argued that the church observing something called World Communion Sunday is a bad idea. How could there be anything wrong with something as wholesome, as inclusive as an awareness about the world-wide nature of communion? Professor Murphy puts forth three theological reasons against a “World Communion” designation:

1. First, she asserts that it’s not *our* place to confer meaning to an observance of the sacrament, such as by saying that this observance is particularly mindful of communion’s global nature. This is the *Lord’s Supper*, she reminds us, and our Reformed Protestant tradition asserts that the sacrament has meaning because of what Jesus has done, not because of anything *we* say or do.
2. Second, the Christian church exists because Jesus called us into being *through* the act of table fellowship. It’s communion’s “ordinariness” that gives it meaning and power. The common act of eating and drinking everyday elements of bread and wine reminds us of Christ’s sacrificial life. Professor Murphy contends that it’s contrary to the very nature of the Lord’s Supper to claim that we’re having a “special observance” of something that is sacred precisely because it is so common and ordinary.
3. And third, she suggests that the celebratory nature of a “World Communion” observance may serve as a pair of rose-tinted glasses as we view the world. This “Kum ba Yah” moment of World Communion unintentionally blinds us to the injustice, oppression, domination and exploitation done *against* some Christians – even *by* some Christians – injustices that are more prevalent in the world than we may care to realize.³

While I think her theological insight is sound, I disagree with her conclusion. I’m going to make a generalization now: when thinking about the worldwide church of Jesus Christ, most of the time, most Christian congregations have themselves in mind. People think, “*This is what I know... the way we do it is normal and proper and a model for others....*” When we think of the Christian church, we here this morning most likely think of *this* congregation... or perhaps the congregation we grew up in or another church we used to attend... or maybe even a church we’ve seen on television such as for the royal wedding last spring or for Senator McCain’s funeral a few weeks ago.

And if we *do* think of communities of Christians in other congregations or in other denominations, often we’re thinking in terms of “them” and “us.” Yes, we don’t see “them” as part of “us.” For instance,

- the “mega-churches” we see on TV – they’re not “us”;
- all those theologically conservative Baptist and Assembly of God and Pentecostal churches we always hear about, especially down South – we’re not like “them,” are we?;
- all those storefront congregations in the inner city with their weather-beaten hand-painted signs;
- even those congregations we’re not quite sure are truly Christian like Unity and Latter Day Saints and Unitarian Universalist and Jehovah’s Witness churches.

We have a hard time thinking of churches down the road or elsewhere in America as part of the same diverse fellowship of people who seek to follow the way of Jesus. We’re slow to see fellow Christians in our own nation as our sisters and brothers in Christ. Is it any wonder, then, that we need World Communion Sunday to be reminded that although the U.S. has more Christians than any other nation, 90% of the world’s Christians live in countries *other* than the United States?⁴ That both here and abroad there are, in fact, Christians who don’t look like us? Who don’t speak our language? Whose worship spaces look nothing like church buildings as we know them? In the comfort and freedom and security of this great nation we need to be reminded that in other lands there are people whose practice of

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Communion_Sunday, accessed 10/4/2018

³ Debra Dean Murphy, “Why World Communion is a Bad Idea,” October 2, 2012 at <http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/blog/2012/10/why-world-communion-sunday-is-a-bad-idea/>, accessed 10/2/2018

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_by_country, accessed 10/4/2018

the Christian religion puts them at risk of scorn by their non-Christian neighbors, discrimination by employers, harassment or detention by government agents.

Can we expand our thinking to see that Christianity exists – indeed, it thrives – beyond the walls of this particular church?

When I meet with my fellow Rocky River clergy each month, we enjoy a collegiality, a friendship even. There's no sense of "competition," with our fellow priests and ministers. There's no judgment about the distinctive practices or beliefs or activities of our various traditions. As pastors serving local congregations we *know* how much we have in common.

The same is true when I attend a Presbytery meeting or function. Gathered with ministers and elders from about forty other churches, we know that there are going to be differences among our congregations: some are in rural Geauga and Ashtabula counties, others are in the suburbs, and a few are urban churches like Bethany on West 65th or Church of the Covenant in University Circle or North Church on Superior at East 45th or Old Stone on Public Square. Some have significant income, others struggle to remain viable on shoestring budgets. A few have hundreds on their membership rolls, but most congregations can count their membership in the dozens. Even the fellow Presbyterian congregations in our own presbytery are a diverse lot.

Whether thinking of other churches right in our communities, or our sister congregations in our presbytery, or even this congregation that probably reflects some of our nation's division on political and social issues, World Communion Sunday encourages us to remember and cherish our unity in Christ. From the Letter to the Ephesians we heard this morning that it was Christ's message of God's love and peace that brought us near to him, and thus near to one another. Paul the apostle had been raised in the Jewish tradition; like many fellow Jews, he came to know Jesus as God's promised Messiah and Savior. But there were also non-Jews (they were known as Gentiles) who came to accept Jesus as their master and Savior. So Paul acknowledges that they who used to be opposed to each other are now one because of Jesus. He wrote :

¹⁷So Christ came and preached the Good News of peace to all – to you Gentiles, who were far away from God, and to the Jews, who were near to him. ¹⁸It is through Christ that all of us, Jews and Gentiles, are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father.

We Reformed Protestant Presbyterian Christians are proud of our heritage, descended as we are from wise, thoughtful, brave, devoted and persistent believers through the centuries. Understandably, friends in Methodist and Congregational and Episcopal and Lutheran and Brethren and Pentecostal and Orthodox and Disciples of Christ and Baptist and Catholic churches all cherish the story of their unique heritage as well. Part of our history we have in common with other denominations; other parts are unique.

But our uniqueness as Presbyterian Christians does not permit us to exclude others or to look down upon others from atop a self-declared mountain of exceptionalism. Despite all that is distinctive about various Christian persons and congregations and denominations and traditions, World Communion Sunday urges us to remember that we are one not because of any magnanimous initiative on our part. It's the spirit of Jesus bringing believers together. Jesus unites us with fellow Christians wherever they are without regard to nation, age, gender, ability, vocation, class, education, theology.

We may be puzzled by the practices of some Christian denominations. We may be incensed by some stance proclaimed by some other congregation. We might even be amused by the activities we see in some other church. But isn't it amazing that what we see as major distinctions and divisions among churches God is able to overlook as minuscule differences and welcome us all? Indeed, the significance of those distinctions and differences evaporate when we remember that "through Christ... all of us, Jews and Gentiles, are able to come in the one Spirit into the presence of the Father."