

“In Common”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
October 3, 2021—World Communion Sunday

- Acts 11:1-18
- Galatians 3:26-28

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame + Museum is just ten miles east of our church. It's a popular destination in downtown Cleveland for area residents, for people from all over the country and indeed, around the world.

Imagine a busy summer's day at the “Rock Hall.” A couple from this church is standing in line at the ticket counter. It's been years since they last visited the Rock Hall and they're interested in seeing the recent modifications and the new exhibits. As they wait in line to pay their admission fees, they notice a family in line behind them. The couple doesn't know the family. The children are wearing spiritwear from the Rocky River schools: shirts or hats with the Pirate logo or the words “Rocky River” or the name of their school. The couple strikes up a conversation with the parents. Pointing to the children's clothing, they say, “We're from Rocky River, too. Is this your first time to the Rock Hall?” And before you know it, these four adults who are otherwise strangers begin to find a connection with each other because of a common home town.

Now imagine you're waiting in a slow-moving line at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, one of the most visited museums in the world. You notice the couple behind you: she's wearing a Xavier University t-shirt and he's sporting a Cincinnati Reds ballcap. You remark that you enjoy watching the interleague rivalry when the Indians and Reds play each other. That begins an exchange: where do you live in Cincinnati, and we have friends who live near there, and before you know it, the four of you who are otherwise strangers begin to find a connection with each other because of a common home state.

Now imagine you're waiting in a slow-moving line at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam to see the amazing Rembrandt collection. As you make your way through the back-and-forth line you hear people speaking French, Chinese, Spanish, Dutch, Polish, Arabic. You notice a husband, wife, and two teenage children in the line moving toward you. They're speaking English—American English—and the clothes they're wearing feature several notable California locales: UCLA, the Los Angeles Dodgers, Manhattan Beach, the San Diego Zoo. As the line snakes along and you come near to each other periodically you strike up a conversation with these strangers because you know they are fellow Americans.

In each of those situations—at Cleveland Rock Hall, Washington's Air & Space Museum, Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum—you didn't dwell on differences that may have served to keep you apart. You didn't make judgments about your new friends based on whether they own or rent their home, their social conservatism or progressiveness, whether the Indians or Reds are legitimate contenders, the peoples' political affiliation, whether the quality of life is better on the Great Lakes or in the Ohio River Valley or on the West Coast. No, you didn't focus on

differences that could serve to separate you. In those situations what you noticed, what you focused on was what you had in common.

Sadly, focusing on what we have in common with others is not our tendency.

God-revering people all across the world are adept at focusing on what distinguishes us from other believers. We note how various religious traditions call God by other names. We shake our heads in sadness at the way some other groups envision God's will for the world. And of course, it's human nature to view ourselves as "natural" and "normal" and "reasonable" and "acceptable," but to view others as, well, "other."

Yes, we Christians see our Christian faith as "normal." We may not say it, but in the back of our mind we presume that other faith traditions lack relevance to the modern world. We imagine that other faiths are simply localized, culturally-specific religions or they are an historic remnant of God's unfolding plan for humanity. And let's be honest: even within the Christian faith various branches hold each other at arm's length, too; we view one another with a bit of wariness: "they" are so progressive, or conservative, or evangelical, or traditional, or literal, or inflexible, or antiquated, or whatever it is that makes them not "us."

Early in the life of the Christian faith one of the great leaders of the church, Simon Peter the apostle of Jesus, experienced a revelation from God that made an enormous and lasting difference for the future of the Christian Church. In the early days, followers of Jesus came from two social groups.

One group consisted of those people who were Jewish. You might have been a fervant practitioner of the Jewish faith, or maybe your family simply identified with the roots of Jewish culture. But you were considered a Jew. That was one group.

The other group of Christians were people who weren't religiously or culturally Jewish. They were part of the widespread Greek culture, so they were called Greeks or Hellenists. They were called Greeks even if they lived as far away from Greece as Palestine. (The Jews called the Greeks Gentiles, which was the Jewish term for anyone who wasn't Jewish.)

A major source of dissention among the early Christians was whether a person needed to be Jewish in order to be considered a follower of Jesus. After all, the apostles were Jewish. So, the big discussion among followers of Jesus was this: in order to become Christians did Gentiles (Greeks) have to submit to all the Jewish customs and traditions and become Jewish? In Jerusalem most people were Jewish, so they would say, Yes. Peter the apostle of Jesus believed so, too.

But Paul, Peter and other apostles were preaching and teaching throughout Palestine and beyond into Asia Minor where most people were culturally Greek, not Jewish. Peter the disciple of Jesus had a revelation from God, described in Acts Chapter 11. In the vision God directed Peter to eat food that was not permitted according to Jewish tradition, and being a lifelong Jew, in the dream Peter refused. But when he awoke Peter realized that God was signalling that the barrier separating Jew and Gentile had been done away with.

As Paul would later write in Galatians Chapter 3, "26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.... 28 There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."¹

¹ Galatians 3:26-28 NIV (excerpt)

That is a lesson that we still struggle to learn: that “...we are all one in Christ Jesus.”

To reinforce the lesson that “we are all one in Christ Jesus” is one of the reasons so many Christians observe this first Sunday of October as World Communion Sunday every year. As I’ve shared before, an observance originally called World-Wide Communion Sunday was begun by a Presbyterian pastor in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the early 1930s to stimulate Christian unity. Over a number of years it gradually grew in popularity in the Presbyterian Church. During and after World War II the observance was adopted by many other Christian denominations. Nowadays World Communion Sunday is celebrated around the world.²

World Communion Sunday calls us to remember two things:

First, let’s acknowledge that our life in this church holds a prominent place for us. Our church is the center of some of our activity. Our church is the home of some of our closest friendships. Our church serves as the foundation of the spiritual expression of the lives we lead. But as significant as this church is in our lives, our church is but one small part of the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ. Christianity is an expansive and ever-growing world-wide fellowship of believers who know and praise and serve God through devotion to the example of Jesus Christ.

The second thing World Communion Sunday calls us to remember is that what unites us is more important than what separates us. The various historic divisions and schisms and splits within the church have created so many distinctions and differences in Christianity. As a result there are hundreds of denominations and thousands upon thousands of congregations and mission movements. But World Communion Sunday proclaims this crucial message: all the things that could keep us apart are outweighed by the way, the truth and the life that is our Master and Friend, Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Remember the apostle Paul’s assertion to the Galatians that “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”³

When we celebrate the Lord’s Supper today, the way we do it is not the only way it can be properly observed. It’s one of many ways. But the celebration of the sacrament embodies the reality that believers everywhere serve the one Son of God, our Lord and Savior Jesus of Nazareth. As the text of the familiar hymn proclaims,

In Christ there is no East or West,
 In Him no South or North,
 But one great fellowship of love
 Throughout the whole wide earth.⁴

² <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/churchcalendar/world-communion-sunday/> accessed 9/14/2021

³ Galatians 3:28 NIV

⁴ “In Christ There Is No East or West,” Hymn No. 439. *Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990.