

...And *They* are Sisters and Brothers

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
October 2, 2022—World Communion Sunday

Ephesians 4:1b-6 (GNT)

"...Live a life that measures up to the standard God set when he called you. ² Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. ³ Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope to which God has called you. ⁵ There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ there is one God and Father of all people, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all.

I didn't understand a word of what was going on... except "Amen." And I could pick out "*Yeh-sus*" which I knew meant Jesus. But our family had moved to Jakarta, Indonesia just a few days earlier, and I think the only Indonesian that I had learned so far were probably the words for "Thank you" and "Excuse me."

It was Sunday night and the sun had set maybe an hour earlier, so the un-air-conditioned church had cooled to perhaps 85 degrees. Mounted on the walls were oscillating fans that, for me, weren't blowing nearly hard enough. On the ceiling were bare fluorescent fixtures casting a dim blueish light through the room. The church wasn't very big—about the size of your typical school classroom. It was filled with university students—women and men all wearing dark skirts or slacks and white shirts. At one point in the service the pastor asked my father—the newly arrived minister from the United States—to say a few words to the university student fellowship group, and the 5 months of intensive Indonesian language study my parents had just completed paid off. I have no more idea what my dad said than anything else I heard that night.

But I knew I was with sisters and brothers. My family, yes. But sisters and brothers in the faith—the same faith even so far away from our home. The Indonesian Christian university students lived in a population where ninety percent of their neighbors were not Christian. They thrived in a climate whose temperatures and humidity we experienced back home only in the worst of the dog days of summer. Their country's per capita income was a tiny fraction of what we knew in the United States. They ate saté as frequently as we ate hamburgers. Among Indonesians who celebrated Christmas, snow was not involved. Just about everything I experienced there was different from what I was accustomed to.

But that Sunday night during our first week in Jakarta, when their pastor broke a loaf of bread and shared cups of grape juice, I knew I was with people who accepted me, a gawky teenage American boy. They accepted me as their brother in faith because of our common trust in Jesus Christ—or "*Yehsus Kristus*," as they would say.

Four years later I had graduated from high school in Jakarta and returned to the United States to start classes at The College of Wooster. In Wooster I chose to attend Westminster Presbyterian Church which met in the College's chapel. I had been there about five weeks when Westminster observed World Communion Sunday. The ministers there invited worshipers to approach microphones stationed around the sanctuary and mention Christians they were remembering in various places in the world. Some of the international students described their home churches in Cameroon,

France, Japan, Brazil. A few professors described Christian communities they were acquainted with from study leaves spent overseas.

Already at that point I wasn't afraid to use a microphone. I approached one of them and mentioned that I was remembering my family who was still in Indonesia on the other side of the world, who would remain there until my last year of college. I said that I was remembering the English-speaking church where we worshiped most weeks with a small congregation composed of American and British and Australian embassy personnel and missionaries and businesspeople.

That's who I thought about on that – the first World Communion Sunday that I can remember.

Who do you think about today? What churches have been part of your life that you remember today?

- Perhaps a church of your childhood. Maybe it doesn't even exist anymore, but your memories of it are still vivid: the brick or stone or wood exterior, its churchy smell, observing landmark occasions in your life and in the life of your family, the people who were fixtures in that church – your memories of it are still vivid.
- Perhaps you remember a church you attended as a young adult – perhaps on the military base where you were first stationed, or in the college town when you were away from your family for the first time, or as newlyweds setting up a new household in a new city.
- Maybe you remember going to church with your grandparents, being baffled by why all of those strangers were so interested in how you'd grown since your last visit.
- Maybe you have a vivid childhood memory of a potluck dinner in a church basement where a missionary back in this country on furlough showed slides and told stories about boys and girls in an exotic, far-off land.
- Maybe yours wasn't a church-going family, but your best friend's family adopted you on Sunday mornings.
- Or like me, you might have had experiences worshiping with congregations in other countries, other cultures, other denominations within the Christian family.

World Communion Sunday is intended to help us remember. To help us remember the churches that formed us.

I hope World Communion Sunday also helps us realize the vastness of the Christian faith. There are so many churches that we will never even know about, so many churches in countries we may never have heard of, so many churches in regions of the globe we probably will never visit. They worship in languages other than English. They may dance or stand or sit or kneel in worship. They may sing boisterously or speak as the Spirit moves them... or they may rest in silence for such long stretches of time that we'd feel uncomfortable in that stillness.

We tend to think that our way of worshiping is the "normal" and "correct" way, and that our concept of God's nature is accurate and complete. But God is bigger than our experience. God has been revealed to people in a variety of cultures and geographies. That's why World Communion Sunday provides us a healthy reminder

that Christ's Church extends far, far beyond these familiar walls. Christ's worldwide Church includes people who, though in some ways quite different from us, are nevertheless sisters and brothers to us because we embrace a common faith in God revealed in Jesus Christ the Son. As we heard from Ephesians Chap. 4, "There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is one God and Father of all people, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all."¹

Indeed, it's the unifying power of the Holy Spirit that draws us together and holds us together. That Spirit is like a gravitational force that draws us in, that gives us a firm foundation. From our firm foundation, rooted in the mercy and compassion of Jesus, we're inspired to reach beyond ourselves in Christian love to meet the needs of others.

Selfless giving for the sake of strangers may not make sense, but God's Spirit can defy what we think is sensible. For instance, a college professor wondered how it is that at his school

"...The most popular spring break activity is not getting drunk on Florida beaches. It is the volunteer option, spending the week in some poor area of the East Coast, from Maine to North Carolina, building housing, cleaning out old houses, painting houses for the poor, fixing parks for children, and the like. Even students faced with twenty-four-hour bus rides, rusty cold showers, rats, bats and garbage come back encouraging their friends to sign up [for next year]. What did they discover that made such an impact? A spirit binding people together in a common effort to build up the human and church community."²

The Spirit binds those college students in fellowship and purposeful service. It is the same Holy Spirit that makes us one Church all around the world. Even though the reality is that this "one Church" has so many different varieties reflecting diverse outlooks and distinct practices, we are one worldwide Church. We need to keep reminding ourselves of that. We are one Church seeking to introduce the world to our loving God by the way we follow the example of Jesus.

Among church-going folks there's an all-too-human temptation to "badmouth the competition" by making disparaging remarks about "those Baptists" or "those Orthodox" (or "those Presbyterians") and so on. What does that do to build up the church? Nothing.

So on this World Communion Sunday let's resolve to remember that the worldwide Church is made up of people of faith and goodwill who, through Jesus Christ, are sisters and brothers to us. And motivated by Christ's love and guided by his example, let us expand our sense of family to see all people as sisters and brothers.

By God's grace may we fulfill the guidance we heard in the third verse of Ephesians Chapter 4 which urges, "Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together."³

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¹ Ephesians 4:5-6 GNT

² New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. XI. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000, 424-425.

³ Ephesians 4:3 GNT