

What Binds Us

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October 2, 2011, Binkley Baptist Church

World Communion Sunday

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Philippians 3:4b-14

*World Communion Sunday – celebrated the first Sunday in October – is one of the most venerable of “special Sundays.” The day has taken on new relevancy and depth of meaning in a world where globalization often has undermined peace and justice – and in a time when fear divides the peoples of God’s earth. On this day we celebrate our oneness in Christ, the Prince of Peace, in the midst of the world we are called to serve – a world ever more in need of peacemaking.**

*Quoted from *World Communion Sunday, October 2, 2011*, the National Council of Churches in Christ website, 2011.

I.

Throughout the world in many nations and cities, Christians today remember a day not marked on many formal church calendars, and yet close to the heart. On World Communion Sunday, in Asia and Africa, Europe and the Americas, in the Pacific Islands, and in small towns overlooking the Indian Ocean, as they take bread and pass the cup, followers of Christ pause to remember those they know in the next town the next nation, and pause again to pray for sisters and brothers they have never met, around the world.

For me it is a day fraught with memory—memory of the churches where I have worshiped in many lands. Where have you worshiped, in your travels? I remember today worship with the Kachin Baptists in Mandalay in Burma one evening in 1995. I remember the church I grew up in, in Chennai, India, St. Andrew’s Church—a big old building with open windows, and birds flying freely around its high ceiling. I remember the Memorial Church at Harvard University where I spent my Sundays as a youth listening to preachers like Peter Gomes, hearing grand organ music and reading the names of the war dead. I remember sitting in silence with Quaker friends in Haverford Pennsylvania: the communion there involved no bread, no cup, and sometimes no words.

One more: I remember being invited by my good friend Larry Murphy, a priest, a tall half Dutch half Irishman from western New York, invited to receive communion right at the altar in the Roman Catholic parish he served after we swapped pulpits one Sunday. As we approached the moment for the Mass and stood at the altar, he whispered in my ear: “Don’t be surprised: I am going to kiss the table now.” I wasn’t sure how to respond, a Baptist minister in a black robe about to be served publicly in a Catholic parish with a conservative backlash going on. “Larry, should I kiss the table too?” He whispered back: “Sure, go ahead. It might help.” I will never forget the taste of the well worn wood of the high altar at Holy Rosary Church. Larry Murphy died a few years ago; I went for the calling hours before his funeral mass...not too many people provoked love like he did. If his spirit is here today, he is probably kissing this nice round wooden table right now. Hey, it might help.

Whom do you remember today, around the world? What incense filled cathedral or tiny village chapel, or even worship under some tree: what comes to your memory?

II.

Don’t you wonder sometimes, what is it that binds us, in all our diversity, rich and poor, orthodox and heretic, women and men, young and old, people of every land? What is it that ties us together, despite all the miles, all the distance, all the mistrust and all the history of division? I suppose there are many things, despite the vast differences in language, in practice, and sometimes, in attitude.

And yet as we read from scripture today, two hints emerge for me, shining out from all the rest, and often overlooked in the debates over dogma and the mistrust among different movements. The first hint is claimed with and from from our Jewish forebears and friends: it is there in the very first words of the covenant given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. The words are these: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery....”

Usually when we think of the Ten Commandments we think of the first as “I am the Lord your God... You shall have no other gods before me.” But before the rules comes the memory—and it is a memory carried in the phrase we often leave out in recitation. Before the rules comes the memory of emancipation: the memory of a liberating pillar of cloud and fire, of the receding of the reed sea swamp and the lingering taste of manna in the desert. I AM is the one who destined us not for slavery but for freedom. The covenant with God’s people is a covenant with people who are a free people.

Especially during the Jewish high holidays it is appropriate that we remember this promise, this memory of liberation that underlies the oldest part of our tradition as well. This memory, this *knowledge* that we worship the One who sets free the captive and looses the bonds of oppression is one of the most basic elements that bind us as people of faith around the world. You can find followers of this emancipating deity marching for justice in Alexandria and in Hyderabad, in Raleigh and in Washington. You can find followers committed to this same revelation of liberation, around the world: women ministering to child widows in India, believers gathering quietly in China; a minister who is a labor organizer in Albany... a congregation sheltering refugees in South Africa. We know in our bones, we remember, that the God in whose name we gather wants freedom, dignity and hope, not just for one people but for all the peoples.

III.

The second hint emerges in our second reading. Here we find the Apostle Paul reminding us that to be a disciple of Jesus is to give up what we have by privilege and inheritance, in favor of becoming whom we know we are called to be, people ready to give it all up for the sake of a greater cause. It is our calling, he tells us, our destiny, not to stand apart or above from the rest of creation but to suffer with those who suffer even as we rejoice with those who rejoice. Paul acknowledges that this isn’t an easy thing or even something he feels he has already accomplished.

The life of a follower of Jesus is a pilgrimage, a journey, a wilderness trek toward a new kind of relationship—communion with all of humanity, communion with grief and communion with struggle, communion with moments of great beauty and communion with the harshest pain and unjust suffering.

This kind of communion doesn’t stop when we leave the church building—indeed it has barely begun. This communion we taste when we stand with a grandmother, when we speak up for the rights of all people without regard to orientation, race or national origin. This communion tastes a little like rust, and a little like sugar, it tastes like tears and it tastes like laughter...this is communion not only around the world but with the world.

As we gather at this table today may we taste the wood of altars and crosses and may we hear the raised singing voices of gathered sisters and brothers of every nation and tribe. May we remember the liberating love of a God who brought slaves across the desert and who continues to struggle for those in captivity and exile.

As we gather to eat bread and drink of the cup, may we remember that this is but the beginning, not something we do because we deserve any special privilege, but rather as a way to seal the deal, to commit once more to a pilgrimage of solidarity and sacrifice, love and costly joy.

What do you remember? What binds us together? And where are you called to go next?