

## Sermon for October 2, 2016 – “Same Difference”

World Comm. Sunday, 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT, Year C – Texts: Psalm 133; Philippians 3:4b-14

One World Communion Sunday, during the children's sermon, the pastor was asking the kids what Communion was all about. “The Bible talks of Holy Communion being a ‘joyful’ feast, he said, “what does that mean?” “Well,” he continued, “‘joyful’ means ‘happy,’ right? And a feast is a meal. So a ‘joyful feast’ is a ‘happy meal.’ Then he asked, “what are the three things we need for a happy meal?” One of the children raised his hand and with a puzzled look on his face said, “a hamburger, fries, and a regular soft drink?”

Today is World Communion Sunday. Today we remember that we are members, different parts, of the Body of Christ. We will celebrate the communion liturgy in as many ways as there are congregations. The sacrament itself goes by many names; Holy Communion, the Eucharist, and so on. Different breads will be used. Some will serve wine, others grape juice. Some will share elements that are particular to that community. The elements will be distributed in different ways. Some will remain in their pews and individual cups and pre-sliced bread will be passed from person to person. Some will use the method known as “intinction”, as we will today. The presence of the Lord in the elements will be understood differently. Some will believe that they become the actual body and blood of Christ. Others will see Jesus as being otherwise spiritually present in some way. Indeed, there will be differences, some of them quite profound. Some will think that their way of doing what they are doing is the only proper way to do it. Traditions differ on who is allowed to partake in the meal. Some will welcome only those who belong to that particular community. Others only to those who are baptized.

The one thing will stand out above all else is that we will all believe that what we are doing is crucially important. I wonder: what do we make of that? Where, given our differences, is this ‘community’ that we talk so much about and seem to prize so dearly? Where is our communion with one another? Where is our communion with God?

In two things. The first, oddly enough, is in our differences. One scholar makes this observation. “What is common in community is not shared values or common understanding so much as the fact that members of a community are engaged in the same argument. “An argument in which alternative strategies, misunderstandings, conflicting goals and values are thrashed out.” Think about that for a minute. What helps to define us as a community, the Body of Christ both here and around the world, is that we’re all engaged in the **same** debate. And the debate centers around working out the best way to respond to the call of Jesus Christ. So, part of what defines us as community is less that we **agree**, but that we believe that even our **arguments** are important. Our common discussion helps to define us as a communion, As the Body of Christ, As God’s people, As Brothers and sisters in Christ, As God’s family.

Which brings us to the second aspect of our unity. Which, as you might expect, would be what we have in common, what unites us. And, what unites us in my mind far outweighs what divides us. Because, like the Apostle Paul in this morning’s reading, we want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. In different ways, we become like Christ; sharing in His sufferings, that somehow we may attain the resurrection from the dead. We know that we’ve not already reached the goal, but each of us in our own way presses on toward that goal because Christ Jesus has made us His own. Our means are different, but our goal is the same. And that goal, that prize, is the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

The question then is – how do we define community? What does it look like to us? What, to coin a phrase, is the state of our union?

I'd like to share a story about one pastor's experience on World Communion Sunday in the late 1960's. It took place at the height of the civil rights movement. Two women were walking down the aisle to receive communion. They represented a conflict that had recently torn apart both the church and the surrounding community. All of this began one Saturday afternoon. The pastor was preparing for a wedding where he was to assist when the phone rang. The caller, Mary, asked if she could attend his church. She'd gone to a local Baptist church but hadn't felt at home there. "Of course," replied the pastor, "everyone is welcome at our church". As he was leaving the phone rang again. This time it was a young female member of the church from whose house Mary had called and she was clearly upset. She asked the pastor if he realized that the Mary was black. The pastor said no and so the woman began to apologize, but he assured her that she'd done the right thing. The wedding was held at the large Baptist church in town. There the pastor had learned that **this** was the one Mary had mentioned. She'd been attending there, the Baptist church, for three weeks until the minister received an anonymous phone call warning that the church would be burned down if that "so-and-so" kept coming. It was at that point that Mary was asked to leave and not come back. Naturally, the pastor wondered how **his** church would respond to Mary? The pastor knew that the members were warm and friendly once they got to know someone but didn't know if they'd want to be on the front line of social change. The next church council meeting didn't go well. Fears were raised, the biggest was that of a conspiracy. They were afraid that others "like her" would begin attending. They were afraid that giving would drop. One of elders, however, volunteered to bring Mary to church. Mary came that Sunday and in the weeks that followed without incident a few people spoke politely to her, others avoided her. Some hoped that she'd just quietly disappear. But not only did Mary **not** disappear, she eventually joined the church. By and large, the congregation seemed to accept Mary. The one notable exception was Betty. She'd been responsible for setting up communion but when Mary joined she asked the pastor to find someone else to do it and stopped coming altogether. Betty stayed away for a several months until one Sunday, she came and sat in her usual spot. She came every week right up through World Communion Sunday. On that day, there was a bigger than usual crowd and both Mary and Betty were there. The elements were distributed and it soon became apparent that they were running out of cups. At least a dozen people in the back rows had not been served. The pastor whispered to an assisting elder, "We need more cups!" "We don't have any more!" came the reply. What to do? Suddenly inspired, the pastor offered all those who hadn't been served, and who were willing, to partake of a common cup. But as the people came forward the pastor soon realized that Betty would be right next to Mary when he served the cup. His heart sank and he began to panic as the two women approached and stood next to one another at the communion table. He gave the cup to Mary...Mary drank and passed it to Betty. And would you believe, without batting an eye, Betty drank from the cup and passed the cup to the next person. Eventually all drank and returned to their pews without incident. As people filed out several noticed that the pastor had tears in his eyes.

What a great story! What a powerful witness not only to God's grace but the sacraments ability to convey that grace!

Brothers and sisters, here's the thing...Regardless of who we are, regardless of what we believe about the sacrament we celebrate on this World Communion Sunday, the source and inspiration of the sacrament, the **author** of the sacrament – is Jesus Christ because the sacrament is a reminder of His sacrifice for our sakes... The giving of His body and His blood.

We, you and me, all people called by His name, are the Church. Together, we are the body of Christ. It is Christ that gives the Church all the gifts necessary to be His body. It is Christ who calls and equips us to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world. It is Christ who give the Church its faith and its life. Its unity and its mission. Just as God is one God and Jesus Christ is our one Savior, so the Church is one because it belongs to its one Lord, Jesus Christ.

The Church seeks to include all people, never content to enjoy the benefits of community for itself alone. There is one Church because, as Paul reminds us, “there is one Spirit, one hope. There is one body and one Spirit, just as we are called to the one hope of your calling, One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Because in Christ the Church is one, it strives to be one. To be one with Christ is to be joined with all those whom Christ calls into relationship with him.

It is at His table we gather...And it is at His invitation. The table is set – the meal is prepared. All are welcome.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.