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First Presbyterian Church
October 7, 2018
World Communion Sunday
Mark 9:38-50

“A Really Good Idea”

World Communion Sunday is, I think, one of the better ideas of the Church. Its history dates back to the 1930s when a group of American church leaders decided we needed a way to show a country deep in depression that everyone, no matter what their Christian background, was committed to a better world, a world where God’s kingdom really would come.

The idea mushroomed, and eventually the World Council of Churches got in on the act. So now, on the first Sunday of October, churches all over the world come to the table of our Lord and celebrate, together, his love for the world, therefore breaking down walls of hostility between nations, races, and ideologies, if just for a day.

On this day, religious creeds and confessions and catechisms matter very little. One article of faith suffices as Christian heritages and denominational loyalties mellow, and we remember in our own way that “by one spirit we are all baptized into one body.” Especially in this world of complexity and struggle, it is important for all Christians to conscientiously join together in communion, sharing the common bread and cup, in order that we who call ourselves Christians might remember that night when Jesus broke bread for his disciples and instructed them to do for others what he had done for them. Therefore, it must be made very clear that we who gather around this table are here not just to share in the feast, but also to share in the work.

And, indeed, there is work to be done. We live in a world and country that is full of walls that divide us. Vicious political ads run on our televisions, and hostilities between political parties grow deeper, hostilities that were made all too apparent at the confirmation hearings of Brett Kavanaugh. Last week, Senator Jeff Flake said on “60 Minutes” that he could never have

called for that FBI investigation had he been running for e-election. "There's no value to reaching across the aisle. There's no currency for that anymore. There's no incentive," he said. That's a sad statement my friends, and one his colleagues on the other side of the aisle can probably echo. As people of faith, no matter what party we claim allegiance to, we can and should and must work for better than that.

And then there's the unexplainable violence we witness. Mass shootings are real; kids – my kids – have intruder drills at school and are taught to use school supplies as a defense weapon. The two Nobel Peace Prize winners announced on Friday reminded us that in some countries it's dangerous to be a woman because they're used as a weapon of war.

People who should know better are using words that hurt and only contribute to building the walls higher. Belittling a woman who told her sexual assault story in front of a nationally televised audience isn't only hateful, it's wrong – no matter whether you think she's credible or not. And to say it's wrong isn't a political statement, it's a faithful statement. Jesus calls us to a higher standard.

When will it stop? Is there no choice but to accept the world as is, or is there an alternative vision?

There is an alternative, but it doesn't use force or the power of persuasion. It doesn't require military power or economic power or market power. But in the long run it's far more powerful, far less costly, and far better. It sounds terribly naïve, quaint really, because it is such an alternative to what we see and hear and live. It is a very radical alternative. It is the power of God's love.

God's love calls us to the table, and at the communion table all walls are torn down. It doesn't matter who thinks they're the greatest or most powerful or wealthiest, prettiest or smartest. What matters most at the table is how we're getting along with each other. If we're fighting with each other and calling one another names, we are not being the people God wants us to be. In fact, every time we throw a bomb or call people

hateful words, we get further and further away from what God intends for us.

At the communion table, our relationships with one another are restored and renewed, because Christ's broken body makes our broken relationships whole again. But you'd never know this by reading the paper or watching the news. It's almost as if people seem happy to feast at Christ's table on Sunday, but on the other days of the week they forget all that, and rarely display the type of generosity that Christ showed us. Our desires to build walls and be the best generally overwhelm our desires for peace or inclusiveness.

Fortunately for us, World Communion Sunday affords us the opportunity to confess our propensity to build walls that exclude people, and Mark's Gospel provides the perfect corrective for this.

By this time in Mark's gospel, Jesus is speaking openly about his impending death, and he's urging the disciples to pick up their crosses and get moving.

But the disciples are too busy arguing over who is the best and telling people who aren't in their "in crowd" to stop healing others. I love how Eugene Peterson translates this passage: "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn't in your group." They sound more like middle school kids than grown men!

"Why would you stop him?" Jesus says. "If the man wants to heal someone, and he's able to do so, then he's with us. It's not up to you to decide who is with us. If someone offers you a cup of water in my name, they're welcome in this circle."

The apostles think they belong to a uniquely-endowed, specially-selected group. Why, they plain old tattle-tail on the man who exorcised the demon in Jesus' name. "How dare he do this," they want to know. "Only we can use Jesus' name." But Jesus says, STOP. Christianity isn't a private matter, only open to a select few. Membership isn't determined by special privilege or unique gifts. In fact, as Jesus tells it in this story, the only

requirement is the tiniest hint of respect and interest in ministering in his name. A cup of water offered to another is enough.

These were and still are radical words. Jesus, who likened his coming kingdom to a grand dinner party, wants us to be gracious hosts and welcome all guests, the believers and non-believers, white and black, English speaking and Korean speaking, liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican, immigrants and citizens, urban and rural. Jesus neither needs nor wants bouncers guarding the door to the feast he alone hosts. Jesus displays a radical openness to those who do wonderful deeds, but for reasons unknown have not yet joined his body of disciples.

This is why, I think, we say in our invitation to the communion table, that we invite anyone who trusts in Jesus to come to this table, because we believe that the invitation is open to everyone.

And it's this radical inclusiveness that convinced the ancient world that Christianity was true.

Christian groups brought food, medicines, and companionship to prisoners forced to work in mines, or banished to prison islands, or held in jail. Some Christians even bought coffins and dug graves to bury the poor and criminals.

This generosity attracted crowds of newcomers to Christian groups. The sociologist Rodney Stark notes that a plague that ravaged cities and towns tore through the Roman Empire. The usual response to such disease was to run, literally, for one's life. But Christians stayed with the sick to alleviate their suffering, and shocked their neighbors by doing so.

Such convictions became the basis for radical new structures and caused the public to take notice.

One of our earliest theologians, Tertullian, in the second century wrote, "What marks us in the eyes of our enemies is our practice of loving-kindness. 'Only look,' they say, 'how they love one another.'" (See Elaine

Pagels, Beyond Belief, pp. 9-10.)

Christians acted in such extraordinary ways because they believed that their God, who created humankind, actually loved the human race and evoked love in return. What God requires is that we love one another and offer help, even when it's only a cup of water.

Churches, communities of faith like this one, are in charge of keeping God's alternate vision alive, and it happens every day in thousands of communities in ways that can only be called "small wonders," whenever, in the name of Jesus Christ, his followers reach out with a cup of water.

This church performs small wonders everyday. Visiting people in the hospital, as our Deacons do, or taking a meal to someone is a small wonder. When you do these things, you are reflecting God's love for people. Lifting each other up in prayer is another example.

You also do things to help people who aren't members of this church. Assembling 25,000 meals for Project 216, which we'll do this Wednesday, is more than a small wonder! Providing meals for the rescue mission, or donating money to PDA is another. All of these are small wonders, cups of water that reflect God's love for everyone.

Affirming a resolution that urges the state legislature to pass hate crimes legislation, which your session did last month, is an act of small wonder, and a symbol of the inclusiveness this congregation believes in, a belief that is sadly not shared by all.

And 40 years ago you showed a radical inclusiveness when you began the Korean language ministry. That was more than a small wonder; it was an enactment of God's love, a commitment to the world that no matter what language we speak or where we're from, we're all brothers and sisters in Christ, members of one family.

Friends, every day this congregation is a reflection of God's love and slowly but surely tears down walls that divide people, therefore living the purpose of World Communion Sunday. You should be proud. I'm proud of you.

A cup of cold water, that's what Jesus asks us to offer -- cups of water, and we do that, you do that, here at First Presbyterian Church.

Thanks be to God for your witness, for all of you and the water you offer.

Amen.