

Sunday, October 7, 2012  
WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

**BEING IN COMMUNION** Ephesians 4:1-7

Rev. Adrienne Carr

Today is World Communion Sunday. For everyone here who grew up within the Congregational, Presbyterian or Methodist traditions, this Sunday is a part of the wallpaper of the Church year. For those of us who come from other traditions, World Communion Sunday is a new picture hanging on that wallpaper. The concept of World Communion is powerful but because of my background, I have conflicted feelings about this day.

The words that we say each Communion Sunday as we welcome all to the table are profoundly moving to me:

“This table is open to all who profess belief in Jesus Christ. Come to this sacred table not because you must but because you may...come... to seek a presence and to pray for a spirit. Come to this table; then sisters and brothers; as you are. It is spread for you and me that we might again know that God has come to us, shared our common lot, and invited us to join the people of God’s new age.” (UCC Book Of Worship p. 80)

For Me, the most evocative phrase in the Invitation is ‘This table is open to all...’

As you may know, I grew up Roman Catholic. I learned in my Catechism that the Roman Catholic Church is the one true church, there is no other. When I was a child, we had wonderful neighbors next door to us. Their daughter baby sat me and took me around on Halloween coaching me not to stumble over the magic words, ‘trick or treat.’ My parents visited the neighbors back and forth, playing cards or having afternoon tea. The Henrys were the only Protestant family in the neighborhood. This was Boston, after all. The biggest political change that I can recall from my youth was when the citizens of Boston elected an Italian Catholic Mayor instead of the traditional Irish Catholic.

One afternoon, my mother and Mrs. Henry got into a discussion on religion. My mother called me in to recite from the catechism the definitive proof of the Catholic Church being the only true church. Mrs. Henry listened politely and politely took her leave. My mother sighed and said, “She is such a good person; it is too bad that she is going to hell.”

So you see that World Communion Sunday is for me, a reminder that the Body of Christ is not whole and complete. It is a yearly reminder to me of how far we are from that wholeness. How far the Christian Community is from true awareness that all of us are the Body of Christ in a world that needs Christ’s healing love.

And yet, when World Communion Sunday began in the midst of the Depression in 1932, the world was in chaos. In 1936 when it became international, Fascism in Italy, Spain

and Germany were planting seeds that grew into World War II, the Holocaust and a time of pain and suffering throughout most of the world. During those years, World Communion Sunday was a liturgical symbol of hope for all people. Across battlefields of war and devastation, the international Christian Community dedicated that one Sunday each year as a poignant reminder that despite war and hunger and suffering, we are still connected to one another, even though imperfectly, through the Body of Christ. And we continue to celebrate this first Sunday of October as a day to hold onto those tenuous bonds of fellowship, trusting that in God's time, we will be one Body in mind and heart. And today all around the world, there is war, hunger and suffering. Perhaps World Communion Sunday can be as much a reminder to us as it was to our parents or grandparents that imperfect as we are, we are still one Body.

The words that come to us from the letter to the Ephesians remind us as they did a small Christian Church struggling to be faithful 2000 years ago, that the Christian fellowship of today is not all that different from our ancestors in faith. We live in communities where we find Churches of all denominations, synagogues and at least one Mosque. Our ancestors lived in cities all over the Roman world. In those cities there were temples and shrines to gods and goddesses, synagogues, and sacred sites. Until it was recognized under Constantine, there were no churches. Christianity was an illegal religion. The faithful met in house churches or in the tunnels of cemeteries. It was inconvenient, difficult and often dangerous to be known as a Christian.

Despite the number of houses of worship in our communities, it is increasingly inconvenient and sometimes difficult to be faithful in this secular world. There is much competition, particularly on Sundays, for the time of families. Basketball, hockey, school play practice, marathons and bike races conflict with Sunday worship. Families are often forced to choose hockey practice over worship and Sunday School. Adults self select the gym or the golf course on the one day in the week that does not carry business obligations. And maybe even the Sunday tee time is a business meeting. Just as did our ancestors, we live in an alien world, one they could never imagine, but still alien.

There is no Constantine on the horizon who will turn human society on its head. I don't want one. I would rather know that each of us has the right to choose to attend the religious service of our choice than be told what to believe and when to worship. This is where that freedom becomes a challenge. Sunday morning can often be inconvenient or frustrating. It certainly was with me when we corralled the kids, checked for dirty faces, hair combed and clothing that was at least marginally acceptable as church wear and were perpetually late. Now in an empty nest, I just have get up and beat my husband into the shower. And, honestly, there are times when I just want to turn over and sleep for another hour. What do you struggle with on Sunday morning in your home: The loss of the extra cup of coffee over the paper, the race to get the children to choir rehearsal, packing the lunch the kids eat on the way to hockey practice or just the early alarm?

Why do we do it? Why do we come each Sunday? Why don't we just give in to the allure of a totally secular environment and have that second cup of coffee while doing the Sunday Times crossword? Why did our ancestors in that Church of Ephesus persevere

in spite of more difficulties that we could imagine? For the same essential reason. We are believers. We come with faith and we seek the peace of God. We come with pain or questions and we trust that we will find strength and insight. We come to be enfolded in music and the singing of familiar hymns and we find joy. We come to be surrounded by a family of belief and in their presence have our own belief reinforced. We come to be strengthened and empowered. We also come to be reminded that despite the secular nature of our world, we are a community of living faith.

Each Communion Sunday we come to the Table to be nourished by bread and cup. The Table is a universal symbol of comfort and sustenance. Picture in your mind, the gathered family around the Thanksgiving table. We see in our mind's eye, the familiar faces and we know our place is assured at the meal. In our incompleteness, on this World Communion Sunday, we, the Body of Christ gather around God's family table squeezed in between Eastern Orthodox Armenians, Jordanian Lutherans, Korean Methodists, South African Dutch Reformed, Congolese Roman Catholics, United Church of South India members of the James Hospital, Mexican Evangelicals, members of House Churches in China and sisters and brothers from North America and Europe. Sitting beside us around the table are those whose life is filled with the daily effort to survive.

Some of us come to the table healthy and strong. Others of us come, weak from malnourishment or disease. Some come from a place of stability. Some, from war, famine and devastation. Yet we all come. And, connected across miles and cultures, we realize how important we are to one another. In our incompleteness we provide strength to one another. Those of us who have more, also have the responsibility to ease the suffering of hurting family members. Even in our incompleteness, we share the pain and the joy of the whole family. In easing the pain of the other, we find that we ease our own pain. There are many ways to share, beginning with both prayer and action seeking for the health and well being of the whole family.

In our incompleteness, we are still one and still seeking the path to completeness. Let this World Communion Sunday be for each of us a conscious act of awareness of those around us in this sanctuary and all those others squeezed around the table. Let us celebrate God's reality that places us in the company of our world wide family where there is mutual care, shared burdens and shared strength.

May the day dawn when all will live in peace and mutual care and until that day comes, may we, the Body of Christ, live that reality in our lives and in our actions. Amen.

I doubt if there is a single moment in our history when all human beings have had enough to eat. Even today, in a world where it is possible to communicate across thousands of miles at a touch of a button, eight million people face chronic food shortages in East Africa. Around the world close to 1 billion men, women and children will go to bed hungry tonight.

Yet a lifetime of experience has taught me that there is no problem so great it cannot be solved, no injustice so deeply entrenched it cannot be overcome. And that includes hunger.