

A World Communion

Psalm 107:1-9

October 4, 2020 World Communion Sunday

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Oh, thank God – she is so good! Her love never runs out.

All of you set free by God, tell the world!

Tell how the Holy One freed you from oppression,

Then rounded you up from all over the place, from the four winds, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some of you wandered for years in the desert, looking but not finding a good place to live,

Half-starved and parched with thirst, staggering and stumbling, on the brink of exhaustion.

Then, in your desperate condition, you called out to God

and the Divine got you out in the nick of time;

The Beloved put your feet on a wonderful road that took you straight to a good place to live.

So thank God for this marvelous love, for miracle mercy to the children of the Beloved.

Holy One poured great currents of water down parched throats; the starved and hungry got plenty to eat.

Psalm 107:1-9, adapted from The Message

It's World Communion Sunday here at First Presbyterian Church and we join churches around the world in celebration. This is symbolized in the beautiful collection of fabrics, weavings and cloth from different places and cultures on our communion table. As we worship here this morning we can imagine different settings for worship around the world. Many people of course this year cannot gather with their congregation because of the Covid pandemic.

This is a moment we use our imaginations each year to picture places where people of the Christian household may worship and gather around the table for communion – modern buildings, churches built 100 years ago, with buildings made of limestone, brick, and marble. Some are simple, plain. There are those who are worshipping God in a sanctuary with mud walls, walls of corrugated steel sheets, or no walls at all. In some way we imagine being with those who worship in other languages and other denominations; we are with those who embrace a variety of faith traditions and understand the ways of Jesus from different perspectives. Through the Spirit we are part of worldwide community. Through the mystery of this feast of bread and cup, we all gather around this actual and metaphorical table to share in the joyful feast.

World Communion Sunday has become one of my favorite Sundays in the church year. It is deeply meaningful to me. Last year we were worshipping in the round in the sanctuary gathering around a round table, hearing Daniel play the African Kora and singing songs from around the world.

World Communion Sunday is a celebration of hope. Let this be the beginning. For a world that is broken and hurting, let our worldwide unity in Christ be a demonstration of the healing and an invitation to radically inclusive and compassionate community.

Our reading from Psalm 107 reminds us that the Hebrew people imagined people coming from all directions, from all nations, to praise the Holy One. One God, not many. The Divine who was with the people and not far removed. That is the vision we need today.

On Wednesdays in September, Bob Hirni taught a Bible study on the book of Revelation. Most people would not study that book with a 10 foot pole. But Bob helped all of us see the new vision of Revelation. It is a hopeful vision that the writer – John of Patmos – was offering to the people of his time and place. They were living under the oppression of the Roman Empire around 95 AD.

In Revelation, John of Patmos shares his mythopoeic vision of the culmination of God's story. In chapter 7 and again in chapters 21-22 he describes seeing thousands upon thousands of people gathered before God's throne; people from every nation, every tribe, speaking every language, and they are praising God, singing of deliverance for they have just come from a great ordeal, from a great struggle.

Life is very often a great ordeal. As tough as it is, John's vision is of this great diverse mass of people gathered together before the seat of God singing. It is a vision of hope and that community of hope is multinational, multicultural and multilingual.

John's vision of an immigration-friendly eternity may not sound like the country some people want to live in, but it is the vision of the reign, the kin-dom of God. And not only are these people safe, but they are promised shelter, food, drink, protection from the sun and heat and the compassion of a God who will guide them to the water of life and sit with them near the tree of life and wipe away the tears from their weary eyes. This is the direction of God's story, toward wholeness, justice and shalom.

This is what we celebrate with siblings around the world, with those who are going through a great ordeal, with those who suffer and those who rejoice, we gather in our beautiful diversity and we praise God. Life is hard, the world is not as it should be, but God is still God and we still join at this table on World Communion Sunday.

How did this Sunday come to be on the first Sunday in October?

The Reverend Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr served as pastor of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA for 32 years before he retired in 1945. That means through two World Wars and the Great Depression, Dr. Kerr led Bible studies, visited the sick in his congregation, joined them for meals around their dining room tables, baptized children, officiated at weddings and funerals. And every Sunday he climbed into the pulpit at Shadyside to deliver the sermon he

had prepared. He proclaimed the Good News of the kingdom of God while the newspaper headlines declared what very well may have felt like the apocalypse at hand.

In the early fall of 1933, the nation was at its lowest point of the Great Depression. The leaves of the trees that lined the street leading to Shadyside Presbyterian Church had turned spectacular yellows and reds, and men and women and children lined up along streets to receive their daily bread in soup lines. 11,000 banks had failed, 25% of the population was unemployed and half of all Americans were living below subsistence levels. On the first Sunday in October 1933, Dr. Kerr celebrated the first World Wide Communion Sunday with a congregation in a nation in a world that was in the midst of a great ordeal. (1)

The church continued to celebrate it every year and started telling other churches about it. The spread of World Wide Communion Sunday was slow at first. However, by the time Dr. Kerr retired, churches across denominations, and around the world had begun to recognize the day. ... As one person from Shadyside put it, "It was during the Second World War that the spirit caught hold, because we were trying to hold the world together. World Wide Communion symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense. It emphasized that we are one in the Spirit."

I love that image: Holy Mystery holding the world together in communion and in love around a bigger table.

It seems to me we need a way to hold things together in our nation and in our world. This has been another hard week - of deaths of over 205,000 people from Covid 19 virus in our country Fires destroying communities. People losing their jobs. Refugees fleeing countries with few options. Our country is deeply divided and hate groups are becoming more visible and violent.

Is it possible that our simple act of gathering for communion meal matters? Does our vision of sitting down with all kinds of people - refugees, those oppressed because of their religion, race, gender, sexuality, or age, those who grieve, those who fear - is it possible that this simple meal, this sacred meal, is part of God's work of holding things together through the Spirit?

Yes. I believe it is possible that in this simple act of joining in the Communion, we are participating in God's activity of healing the divisions that cause so much pain and suffering and death in our world. We are each individually seeking reconciliation, asking God to rid us of fear, anger, resentments and prejudice that leads us as individuals to conflict. Maybe we pause to see how our nation, our world has lost its way, its moral compass, its willingness to find a path to peace and hold onto that larger vision. The deep truth that we want to live out is that we are connected to Holy Love, to each other, to the earth. We come to the table to break bread and recommit to loving ourselves and neighbor.

So let's celebrate World Communion with music from around the world.

Let's imagine people of every language coming to this table - dancing, drumming, singing. Bring all kinds of bread – sourdough, pita, tortillas, nan, bowls of rice, matza.

Let's imagine people bringing pitchers of wine from around the world.

There will be enough. All are welcome. Amen.

1) Rev. Drew Stockstill, "A World Communion," October 4, 2015. Morningside Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA.

<http://morningsidepc.com/archive/MPC/www.morningsidepc.org/sermons/article421057b2b1.html?heading=1&title=1&mini=1&author=1&body=1>