

Galatians 3:23-29
Acts 2:5-13
Txt. Gal 3:28; Acts 2:8

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Devon, Pennsylvania
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World Communion Sunday

For All the People

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female;
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. *Galatians 3:28*

And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? *Acts 2:8*

This is World Communion Sunday, on which day over two billion Christians (1/3 of the world population) are invited to the table of our Lord Jesus to receive, with bread and cup, the nourishment of God's presence. Around the world this day the sacrament is offered among the faithful, and those struggling to be faithful, in great cathedrals with trumpets sounding and banners flying, in small town churches such as this, in a portable nomads yurt on the steppes of Asia, in a Fiji island chapel with ocean breezes tugging at the palm frond roof, on the hood of a jeep in the lull of battle in Afghanistan, and in a densely packed, clay lined house in rural China.

When 33,000 Christian denominations gather at the table today, this is a good day to consider who we are as a world Christian family, whose astonishing diversity cautions us against too easily assuming that our way of being Christian has special legitimacy over others. When our western nations' colonial heritage crumbled before waves of independence-seeking countries in the last century, visitors soon after saw how quickly western modes of Christianity fell before richly colored and musically exotic liturgy, and to faith sharing of deeply experiential modes of faith. Christians in Europe and North America have long been left behind as the world's most influential and vibrant churches. So we are wise to consider how, among such extravagant global diversity, many traditions and cultural norms speak of ways of thinking and being that are very different from our own.

Let me offer an example from relatively close to home. Duke University's John Westerhoff, for instance, tells of being called to consult about problems encountered by government teachers at a school for Native Americans out west. One of the teachers confessed to him that she was morally outraged by the level of cheating among Native American children, something that even appeared to be encouraged by parents and grandparents.

When Westerhoff sat with the children and probed why they look on other children's papers during a test, they told him, "If someone in the tribe knows something, he should tell the other children who don't know. He should go ask someone who knows." Westerhoff realized that what we have been taught to call cheating, they understood as tribal *cooperation*. The question becomes, which cultural stance is more healthy, especially when you expand "cooperation's" horizon into other areas of life?

To be a Christian is, by Jesus' standard, to be challenged to look at the world very differently because the kingdom of God is *very different* from the one we have been handed, which we then cultivated. Which is precisely what Jesus' parables are all about. They start off

very close to his hearers' everyday experience: looking for a job in the marketplace; something valuable lost—a coin, a sheep, a son; a traveler beset by muggers; the unmerciful middle manager; the dishonest executive; the budding fig tree. But at the last they flip to a totally unexpected ending: workers paid the same for different times worked, the flock abandoned in the open for one lost sheep, a “good” Samaritan?, the consequences of not passing on forgiveness, the deceitful steward praised, the promising fig tree withered. But at the end of each parable, it flips to a totally unexpected ending, reversing today's expectations. All the laborers in the vineyard are paid the same full day's wage, regardless of the time they spent at work. The thing lost is pursued even at the expense of everything else (the lost sheep). The man injured and left for dead is given extravagant aid by one deemed no better than a modern-day terrorist—a Samaritan (a *good* Samaritan?). Another discovers the terrible consequences of not passing on forgiveness received. The deceitful executive is rewarded (the dishonest steward—I know, that's a bitter pill to swallow right now, but the parable operates within a very different order of meaning). The promising fruit tree that withers is about things that bear the guise of prosperity from a distance, but on closer inspection have nothing to offer, in this case the Jerusalem Temple. God sees the world through very different eyes.

On her first flight in an airplane, an eight year-old girl, peering down in awe and wonder from 10,000 feet, asked, “Daddy, all those lines between the countries that you showed me on the map—well, I can't see any of them.”

Her wise Dad replied. “I think that's the way God sees it, honey, the way he really wants it to be.”

God has designs on a world and a faith *for all the people*.

Our faith began in rich diversity, and it has never stopped adding to it. Within 400 years of Jesus' life, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. In A.D. 645 Nestorian monks from Syria brought Christianity to China. Three years later the emperor approved the teaching of Christianity throughout the whole empire—this was 800 years before the European Renaissance, and 700 years before Columbus. On this day more Christians will take the sacrament in China than in all the congregations in the whole of North America. The same is true of Nigeria. In South America and Asia, Eastern Europe and North America, Pentecostal Christians gathering at the table, worship this day in numbers larger than the worldwide Catholic Church. There is a lot to be learned here in terms of mutual growth and self-discovery.

Paul reminded the self-satisfied Corinthian Christians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female. All are Christians in Christ Jesus.” And it takes no more sacred form than at a table. In the Book of Acts, which is the story of the earliest church after the resurrection, when the some Apostles had been associated with Gentiles, they were called to account in Jerusalem, not because they had performed baptism among the disciple, but because they had sat at table and eaten with them.

There is something richly sacramental, and symbolic of the human family transcending all differences, to sit at table together. At a table, all distinctions fall away. Food and fellowship take on the marks of solidarity. For the moment, no one is elite. This is a common meal. At a table the host serves from the best that he or she can muster. Aren't some of the most memorable meals those when friends drop in unexpectedly, and we serve what we have. That was the situation on a Galilean hillside when Jesus fed 5,000 men, plus women and children.

And the food was provided by a child, a young boy—five coarse barley loaves (the staple of the poor) and two fish. And all ate and were satisfied. In his gospel John uses this meal as the inaugural Lord’s Supper, not with a few intimate followers in an upper room on the eve of his crucifixion, but *for all the people*. At a table among strangers and acquaintances those gathered are inclined to listen and learn, out of respect for their host and the host’s invitation. Here the host is Jesus himself. At a table we are more naturally inclined to pause and pray, as opposed to eating on the run with a litany of distractions. We say “thank you” for the good earth, and make our thanks known for the invitation and the nourishment of our host. At a table we better discover each other, especially our host—as here. At a table we are family—here, a world family.

Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift.

Amen.