

SECOND READING: John 17:20-26

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<sup>20</sup> “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us,<sup>[a]</sup> so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one,<sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. <sup>24</sup> Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

<sup>25</sup> “Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. <sup>26</sup> I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

FIRST READING: Ephesians 4:1-6

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I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

This is the word of the Lord... **THANKS BE TO GOD**

*“That They All May be One”*

I have always agreed that World Communion Sunday was one of our better ideas...that on the first Sunday of October, Christians all around the world can affirm our oneness by joining hands across barriers of race and nationality, and in the name of our common Lord and common faith celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion together. Decades ago, in the aftermath of WWII, with Europe and Japan in ruins and the human race staggering by our great capacity for violence and destruction, Protestant churches got together and found this as a way to also affirm the oneness of the human race and to speak a word of peace.

By the late 1940s, the National Council of Churches endorsed World-Wide (World) Communion Sunday. Today Christians everywhere gather in huge cathedrals, in open country churches, in mud-thatched sheds, in lean-tos, in open fields, all celebrating the Lord's Supper. Some will gather in secret because Christian worship is a violation of local laws. Yet, millions around the world will come, trusting in Christ and sharing the feast which he joyfully shares with us. (Just fyi, 55 years ago, on World Communion Sunday Oct 4, 1964, 39 people gathered at the Cove Theatre for the first service of the future First Presbyterian Church).

Yes, it is Jesus' Table. Originally, 12 and likely a few more believers gathered around him in an upper room, to celebrate the Passover meal. It was to be their last supper together, for the next day he would be crucified. But before Jesus was arrested and taken from them, he told his disciples that they needed to love one another, as he had loved them. *“By this, the world will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,”* he said. And then on the same night, just afterward, he prayed a prayer they were meant to overhear, what's known as the high priestly prayer. Again, he emphasized his desire that *“they may all be one...and that the world may believe in him through their love for one another.”* Years later, the apostle Paul said virtually the same thing in his letter to the Ephesians, *“I beg you to make every effort to live lives faithful to your call in Christ, maintaining UNITY of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”* He went on to describe what these lives should look like...*ones with humility and gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love.*

Friends, as beautiful as these passages are, I think I can speak for us all when I say that it's frankly also hard to hear them sometimes because they remind us how far from unity we really are. We see anything but peace in our own country and around the world. Frightening images appear on our TV screens of the human propensity for conflict, often violent conflict, hatred and killing from the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe, our own streets. "*There are always people fighting for control, for power, for revenge, for freedom, for a bigger slice of the pie.*"<sup>1</sup> Always, there is some new report that gives us something to worry about regarding our policies, our values, our planet, ourselves, our children. And it's not just the world...when we look at what is going on in our churches too, we see such disunity and disharmony. It makes you want to cry. Intra-denominational fighting is hotter than ever. The Presbyterian church has recently undergone a significant schism and it looks as if the same is in store for the Methodist church. Southern Baptists continue to disagree amongst themselves. The term evangelical has taken on a political rather than its beautiful *euangelical* religious meaning. Catholics and Protestants still can't break the bread of communion together. And in some churches, a place at the table is reserved for members only. Some Lutheran Synods exclude other Lutherans. No, it's not a very peaceful, unified place out there, even in Jesus' church.

But that makes Jesus' high priestly prayer and Paul's message all the more critical, right? Yes. On the same night that Jesus broke bread at the Table...on that very night...he told his disciples that *the world will know him through their love and unity*. The world will know Jesus through his disciples' (our) love and unity, our witness of how we treat each other! We are the Church and it is up to us to NOT ONLY give ourselves up to the working of the Holy Spirit by learning how to live with people we may not like or be like within the Body of Christ, but to extend ourselves outward, beyond the boundaries of the church, into the world, to the neighbor beyond our knowing, to all God's children in their infinite variety, everywhere. And WE can only do this within the church if we refuse to let differences of ideology, race, gender, orientation, economics, nationality and especially these days, politics, become barriers between us...if we

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner. *Secrets in the Dark* (New York: Harper Collins; 2006), 245.

refuse to create hierarchies, “better thans”, within our faith communities. We cannot represent to the world Christ’s core value of loving neighbor as self, we cannot live the life worthy of Christ’s calling, if we are seen as people who are divided and distrustful of one another. We can’t witness the peaceable Kingdom if we denominationally spend our time claiming a corner on the truth and openly attacking others who don’t have the same perspective. We can only witness if we are unified in Jesus’ foundational message of love, and bear it out, that is, respecting and honoring all people, caring earnestly for the weak and suffering, offering hospitality to the stranger and outcast, working for justice and peace for everyone.

In fact, it’s been said that the Church is God’s alternative to the world’s propensity to divide and fight,<sup>2</sup> the world’s propensity put up boundaries that separate along any and all lines. As Marcus Borg said in his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, “*The most public activity of Jesus and his movement was his inclusive meal practice. He was criticized and condemned for the inclusivity of his dinner table, where he sat down with sinners and where he welcomed the marginalized and outcast. It was a political act that “subverted the social boundaries of his day.”*”<sup>3</sup> Friends, I will ask you to think on something I came across in my readings this week...a fascinating thought...Could it be that when Jesus said, “*Do this in remembrance of me,*” that he was referring not only to the Last Supper, but to his entire life of teaching, healing, loving and welcoming all?<sup>4</sup> “*Do this in remembrance of me,*”

*A pastor of a church in Scotland had been an infantryman in the British army in World War II and ended up in a prisoner-of-war camp in Poland. The conditions were dreadful. There was no heat, and prisoners were given a single bowl of thin soup and a small crust of bread daily. Men were starving, sick, filthy and desperate. Suicide was a very real option. All one had to do was run toward the perimeter of the camp and leap against the barbed wire fence. Guards would immediately shoot and kill anyone trying to escape. In the middle of the night he walked to the perimeter and sat down beside the fence to think about going through*

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<sup>2</sup> John Buchanan. “*Becoming the Body*” <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/1998?100498.html> (accessed 9-28-17).

<sup>3</sup> Marcus Borg. “*The Heart of Christianity*.” (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 91.

<sup>4</sup> John Buchanan. “*Shared Meal*” <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-09/shared-meal> (accessed 10-4-19).

*with it. He heard movement in the darkness from the other side of the fence. It was a Polish farmer. The man thrust his hand through the barbed wire and handed him half of a potato. In heavily accented English he said, "The Body of Christ. Do this in remembrance of me."*<sup>5</sup>

Brothers and sisters, it is such a great privilege to be invited to the Table, to come here to partake of the meal that commemorates, in bread and wine, something of Jesus' grace and love and life. It is a great privilege to come here to celebrate and give thanks. And to meet here the living Christ. For indeed we do encounter the real spiritual presence of the Christ. He is the Host, the One who has prepared the feast, the One who so joins himself with us in it that he becomes the very nourishment and food for our souls.<sup>6</sup> *"Pour out your Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and wine that they be for us the body and blood of our Lord"*. Yes, friends, Jesus joins himself with us so that we may share in his life and in the lives of each other. And all of us, all of us, believers across time and place, are empowered at the Table to go out, strong and united, to do his work.

So, today, let us gather at the Table with millions and millions of other Christians, with different histories, cultures and languages, on different continents and in different time zones...amid organ and trumpet and brightly colored vestments, and also amid modest simple trappings...believers everywhere who are encountering the living Lord and hearing his words, *"This is my body"*. *"This is my blood"*. Let us come and meet the risen Savior in this place. And together, in unity and peace, open our hearts and let him enter in.

*"By this, the world will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."* Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> John Buchanan. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-09/shared-meal>