

World Communion Sunday
October 2, 2016

“We’re All in This Together”
by Mary Anne Biggs

2 Timothy 1:1-14 ~ Luke 17:5-10

These are divided times ... in our nation ... in our world. It seems like everybody’s choosing up sides and regarding the others with contempt. Maybe it’s always been that way. It’s the way of the world ... “us against them” ... again and again. Again and again, the hostility explodes into violence. And how do we find the path to peace? Is it not with the recognition of what we all hold in common? Is there not some universal human connection that can help us understand we are all related to one another?

When I read this in Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, it totally blew my mind:
Every atom you possess has almost certainly passed through several stars and been part of millions of organisms on its way to becoming you. We are each so atomically numerous and so vigorously recycled at death that a significant number of our atoms - up to a billion for each of us, it has been suggested - probably once belonged to Shakespeare. A billion more each came from the Buddha and Genghis Kahn and Beethoven, and any other historical figure you care to name.

The personages have to be historical, apparently, as it takes the atoms some decades to become thoroughly redistributed; so, however much you may wish it, you are not yet one with Elvis Presley.

But yes, we are all made of the same basic stuff, and we all share this good world that God made. Long ago the writers of Genesis suggested that God made humanity to be responsible caretakers of creation together. In spite of the tribal divisions and national borders that we have created, our scientists keep discovering more and more ways that we are connected to each other ... such that the well being of any one of us affects the well being of all of us. Chaos theory suggests that the beating wings of a butterfly may set forces in motion that result in a hurricane on the other side of the earth. For good or for evil, all creation is connected. We don’t need to work to create this universal connection. It is already there! We need only to recognize it and quit resisting it.

Well, if the world can’t recognize this universal interrelatedness, then surely we Christians can recognize it among ourselves, can’t we? I mean, in addition to the atomic level connection of God’s creation, we are joined by the bonds of God’s love in Christ. Of all people, we should demonstrate the unity of all humanity to the world. But no. We are also divided. And just as there is no violence quite as passionate as domestic violence ... the divisions in the church are especially vitriolic at times ... disproving in the eyes of the world just about every claim we want to make about God’s love in us.

On the wall outside of the office of the President at my seminary hung a poster from the Mennonite Central Committee that read:

**A
MODEST
PROPOSAL
FOR
PEACE:**

**LET
THE
CHRISTIANS
OF THE WORLD
AGREE THAT
THEY WILL NOT
KILL EACH OTHER**

Well, that would be a start, wouldn't it?

I think we shall never find unity in belief. If some kind of enforced orthodoxy is the only hope for Christians to be unified, I see no hope. But then Christ never called us to have unity of belief, or he would have left us a systematic theology to follow. Instead, he left us a model of love, and called us to follow that. On the night in which he was betrayed ... when he gathered with his disciples in the upper room ... after he had washed their dusty feet, he said:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

Now, in our time, love has been relegated to the list of weak sentimentalities that only make you vulnerable. You won't find love a significant strategy in the boardrooms of business ... or the halls of justice ... or the now smoke free rooms of politics. You won't hear any candidates in the upcoming elections advocate love as the basis for international policy in their debate. But love is the heart and soul of the Christian agenda in the world.

So Paul writes his young colleague as he encourages him not to base his behavior on fear: *For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace (2 Tim 2:7-9).*

"Join with me in suffering for the gospel," he writes. Why should anyone have to "suffer for the gospel" ... for the good news that God loves us all? *Because* the world does not accept love as a solution ... *because* there will always be resistance to God's love in the world ... *because* there are always those who gain more for themselves by not loving as God loves. After all, for this message, Christ himself was crucified. This is Jesus' way: God loves all of us, always, always.

But a big part of this suffering is the suffering which *always* attends love. To love is to suffer when the beloved suffers. To love the world means to take its sufferings for your own. In Chaim Potok's little classic, *My Name Is Asher Lev*, the title character is told,

"Asherel, your father sees the Jewish people as one body and one soul. When a head hurts in the Ukraine, your father suffers in Brooklyn. When Jews cannot study Torah in Kiev, your father cannot sit still in Brooklyn. Do you understand, Asherel?"

We should understand. This is the kind of solidarity Jesus wants us to have as his followers when he tells us to "love one another."

The unity we share as Christians is not a uniformity of belief ... but a universality of love. Today is World Communion Sunday ... when all Christian churches are encouraged to share the sacred supper ... on the same day ... as a remembrance of our unity in the remembrance of our Savior. *Here* we join with Christians in all times and places who have shared this communion. *Here* we join ourselves to the glory and the shame of all our Christian history ... that we might trust in the grace of God alone for our Christian future. *Here* we transcend our differences of opinion ... our differences of style ... our differences of structure ... and we remember that we are one ... and that we are all dependent on the love of God in Christ. He is our unity. He is our peace. He is our only hope.

This picture ... of his suffering, self-sacrificial love for us ... is the way we are told to remember him. From the first communion table on the night of betrayal, Jesus commanded, "Do this in memory of me."

"Was ever another command so obeyed?" asks Gregory Dix,

For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance.... Week by week, month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays ... faithfully ... unflinching ... across all the parishes of Christendom ... the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta Dei – the holy common people of God. To those who know a little of Christian history, probably the most moving reflection it brings is not the thought of the great events and the well-remembered saints, but of those innumerable millions of entirely obscure faithful men and women ... every one with his or her own individual hopes and fears and joys and loves – and sins and temptations and prayers.... The sheer stupendous quantity of the love of God which this ever repeated action has drawn from the obscure Christian multitude through the centuries is itself an overwhelming thought.

So let us come to this table today and join the communion of all Christians in every time and place. The unity of the church, like the unity of creation in the atoms we all share, is *not* something for which we must strive. It is already a reality. It is already a given. What remains is for us to recognize it ... to live by it ... to join in suffering for the gospel ... to take into our own souls the love this table remembers. Will you accept that love ... be shaped by it ... become an embodiment of the love of Christ? Then let us gather on this World Communion Sunday at the supper table of our Lord.

May we pray?

Hear our thanks, O God, that you have invited us here. We do not deserve your invitation and your grace. But may we be made worthy of receiving this supper in so far as we extend the invitation to others without condition, in the grace by which we ourselves have been included. And may the communion we share at this table reach farther and farther and more and more until the love of Christ has extended to the uttermost ends of the earth. Amen.