

World Communion Sunday  
October 4, 2015

**"TOGETHER?"**

*by Mary Anne Biggs*

Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:10-12 ~ Mark 10:2-16

The movie "Smoke Signals," a coming of age story of a Native American in the West, is the story of a great miracle. The tribe is gathering for a feast, but the leaders realize that there is not enough flatbread for everyone. Flatbread is kind of like a pita ... as basic to Native American cuisine as tortillas are to Mexican food. Anyway, the narrator tells of a great miracle that day when the flatbread ran short. His mother picked up a piece of flatbread and tore it in half ... then another ... then another. And, amazingly, there was enough for everyone to have enough.

Well, that is no miracle. Is it? I mean, doesn't something supernatural have to happen for it to be a miracle? Doesn't it have to be verified by some ecclesiastical commission? But, no, this was a miracle. And it makes me think ... maybe it's a miracle every time we share a meal together. Maybe something holy is happening.

Think of your favorite all time meals. I bet you don't think of the best tasting food, although you remember that, too. I remember the last Thanksgiving when everyone was still gathered around the table. I think of home-made brisket smoked for hours and shared with six close friends on a warm Texas evening. I think of the hot dogs that John and I ate together at Friday night football games. You know what? Every one of those occasions was nothing less than a miracle. They were grace gifts. They were holy. God was there. Do you know what we were experiencing? Communion.

I was in a restaurant the other day and noticed a couple having an argument. They weren't shouting, but you could see it in their faces ... hear it in their words ... feel it in their animated gestures. Then they became completely quiet. The woman set down her fork and quit eating altogether. The husband bowed his head and stuffed his food just like he was stuffing his emotions. It happens. Have you ever had a fight with somebody at mealtime? Have you ever sat down to eat when your emotions were screaming and bursting inside you like Fourth of July fireworks? If it doesn't ruin your appetite, it ruins your digestion. Meals aren't meant for arguments. Meals are meant for friendship. Meals aren't meant for dividing. Meals are meant for joining. When you share a table with people you love, the intimacy, the commonality, the act of sharing unites you. And suddenly, your differences aren't the most important thing. The people ... this love ... is the most important thing.

Today is "World Communion Sunday" when we celebrate the unity of the church in all times and places. No, I'm not joking. I know that just last Sunday I preached how fractured and polarized the church is and has been since the beginning. And you can forget the myth of primitive purity where it comes to the early church. The story of Pentecost in Acts gives this glowing description of the church right after Pentecost which has been the ideal picture of the church ever since:

*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

That's what God's Spirit does. But the church is a human institution, too. The New Testament gives witness that almost immediately ... even before apostles wrote epistles ... the first Christians were fighting over doctrine and organization and lifestyle and self-definition. It was a mess, and over the pleas and objections and prayers of the apostles, that mess has continued to this day. Christians don't get along with each other. In this regard we are no better and no worse than other world religions.

I daresay some of us wouldn't be caught dead hanging with some of the other members of this family we call "Christian." But the New Testament says we *will* be caught dead with them, because finally the only criterion that makes us Christian is our profession of faith that "Jesus Christ is Lord." We have little else in common with many of them, but we do have this one thing in common and it is the most important thing of all – Jesus Christ, our Sovereign and Savior. We aren't united in our beliefs. We aren't united in our lifestyles. We aren't united in our organization. We aren't united in our politics. We aren't united in our dreams and ideals. But we *are* united at this table with this supper we celebrate today ... in the grace it represents ... in the Savior who invites us to life.

In *Life Together* Dietrich Bonhoeffer criticized the fuzzy utopian dreams of unity and togetherness that we manufacture in our minds. He declared:

*Christian kinship is not an ideal which we must realize; it is rather a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. The more clearly we learn to recognize that the ground and strength and promise of all our fellowship is in Jesus Christ alone, the more serenely shall we think of our fellowship and pray and hope for it.*

The New Testament declares that all who trust in the grace of Christ will be together in God's eternity, and that includes the Christians we don't like.

So get used to it. We may not get along with all the members of the family, but they are our family. And shame on us if we think God loves us more or that they need more grace than we do. When all human beliefs and behaviors pass, ours included, only the grace of God will matter. Our faith is not in some arrogant and paranoid opinion that we are right and everybody else is wrong. Our faith is in the mercy and justice of God ... in the cross and resurrection of Christ. So we *can* celebrate World Communion Sunday in the church ... because at this table ... however it may be celebrated ... every one of us meets God's provision for our deepest human need ... and God's grace helps us get over ourselves. Here every one of us accepts that we cannot save ourselves ... that we need grace ... and that we find grace in Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!

When I think of what God has done in this place and with this people over the last 128 years, I think of Jacob's words: "*How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven*" (Gen. 28:17). But then I also have to think ...how did this happen? You look around at the diverse people who are here today ... you think of the many who have joined their journey to this church over those 128 years ... and you have to wonder if perhaps we wouldn't know each other at all if we weren't members of the same church because we are so different. What holds us together? What makes us a church? We aren't united in our beliefs. We aren't united in our lifestyles. We aren't united in our politics. We aren't united in our dreams and ideals. But we are united at this table with this supper that we celebrate today ... in the grace it represents ... in the Savior who loves us all.

The single source of our unity and identity is Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews celebrates what God has done in Jesus Christ:

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs (Heb 1:1-4).*

That God bothers to speak to us at all is a thing of wonder. That God has spoken to us repeatedly through history and called us to choose the way of life is in itself a remarkable thing to consider. That God is still speaking to us defies understanding! That God has tried "many and various ways" urgently trying to get our attention ... somehow to get through to us ... reflects the patience and longsuffering persistence of God's love. But the center of the celebration here is the supreme revelation of God in a way we can understand ... God-with-us in human form ... the ultimate expression of God's love in Jesus, the Christ, ... who lays down his life for you and me to say, "This is who I am. This is how much I love you. This is how far I will go to reach you. Nothing can separate you from my love."

Well, we can try to separate ourselves from it, especially in "the many and various ways" we find to separate ourselves from each other. I know that God never quits loving, but God does not coerce us into loving God back. God does not coerce us to obey the way Christ lays out for us to live. God invites us to respond to the Divine love with our love, and life is the result. Love persists. Love waits. Love suffers in the meantime. But love does not coerce. There are limits to human love. Unrequited human love will finally wither and die. You give up and move on. But God's love lasts forever. The cross and resurrection means that you can resist God's love ... you can reject God's love ... but you can't kill God's love for you.

And God does not just love you. God loves us. God loves the world. So the love of God puts us in relation to each other as well as to God, as members of a family. Yeah, there are some cattle rustlers and bad actors in the family. There are some embarrassing second cousins we try to avoid and hide from our friends. But God loves them, too, and like any parent, longs for us to

get along. So God has established this family reunion ... this Sunday dinner ... for us to gather and let our differences go ... and rejoice in being together.

Therefore I invite you today, in the name of Jesus Christ, to be together at this table. Set down, at least for these few moments, your anger ... your bitterness ... your frustration ... your anxieties ... your confusion ... your sorrows ... your grudges ... your dreams ... your opinions ... your beliefs ... your pride ... and come together at the table. Enjoy the grace of God which covers us all. Let Jesus teach us here how to forgive ... how to trust ... how to be together in the unsurpassable, overwhelming love of God. Let Jesus teach us how to love one another ... how to love all the members of this big Christian family ... how to love the world ... and finally, even how to love ourselves. I know that it looks like just another ordinary ritual. But you know what this is? It's a miracle. It's holy. It's the communion of our Lord. May we pray?

Now, O Lord, thank you for all your tender mercies and the ordinary miracles we realize at this table. Bless our fellowship as we come to the table together you have prepared. Let us be nourished in Spirit. Let us be filled by your love. And may we experience communion with you and in the church in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.