



100th Anniversary of the Council on Christian Unity

Worship Resources

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10. World Communion Sunday

Sunday, October 3, 2010

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Focus for Today

In the Stone-Campbell movement, baptism is an initiating act of grace and the Sacred Meal is a continuing and sustaining act. In baptism, God uses the water to assure us of God's love for us and joins us to a community of love (the community of the Realm, the church). Week by week, God uses the bread and the cup to assure us of the divine love for us (even when we violate God's purposes) and to remind us that we are embedded in a community whose purpose is to embody God's unconditional love in its own life and to witness to that love in the larger world.

When we partake, we both accept the assurance of God's love for ourselves and we commit ourselves to love others with the same love that God shows for us.

The experience of receiving the bread and the cup in the context of community is, for many Disciples, a representation of the life of the church. We receive the gift of God's unmerited favor, God's unconditional love, and through the act of passing the trays throughout the congregation, we share that love with others.

Because God intends for the life of the church to be a sign of God's purposes for the world, **World Communion Sunday** is not an end in itself, nor is its ultimate focus Christian unity. Christians eating the bread and drinking the cup across the world is a sign of the community of love, peace, justice, and mutual support that God seeks for all.

World Communion Sunday is thus an ideal occasion on which the congregation can meditate on the most recent identity statement of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ):

“We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.”

Disagreement about how to interpret what happens in the blessing of loaf and the cup often bitterly divided the church in previous generations. Indeed, at the time World Communion Sunday began in 1940 (then known as Worldwide Communion Sunday), churches could be quite partisan not only in their theological understanding of the Meal but in whom they allowed to commune and in those they denied. The founders of World Communion Sunday did not insist that all churches aspire to the same theology of the Supper or to the same form. They honored the inherent diversity in the churches’ thinking and practices while insisting that God’s love both transcends every difference and gathers all churches in community. While differences in theological interpretation continue today, much of the rancor over the theological meaning of the Table has lessened. Nevertheless, the fundamental concern continues: ***To show respect for difference within mutual embrace.*** As the hymn writer Ruth Duck says, the church is “diverse in culture, nation, race,” yet “we come together by your [God’s] grace.” This poet prays for the church in its manifest and manifold diversity to “be a meeting ground where hope and healing love are found” [Ruth C. Duck, “Diverse in Culture, Nation, Race,” in *Chalice Hymnal*, no. 485].

Nevertheless, we should not romanticize World Communion Sunday or minimize the differences among the churches today. While the churches may not get one another in choke-holds over the differences among transubstantiation, consubstantiation, real presence, and symbolism, there are profound differences among churches today regarding God’s purposes. Some of these differences take place along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Other differences occur in spheres of personal and communal behavior. Some statements of doctrine are land mines.

In this world of ecclesial fractiousness, to partake together on World Communion Sunday is to say, “We are finite. We know we have only a partial glimpse of God’s purposes. We need other perspectives to help us enlarge our perspectives. By eating the bread and drinking the cup with other Christians, we commit ourselves to respect one another. When we Christians disagree fundamentally on aspects of God’s purposes, we will witness to our own perceptions with respect for Christians who see things differently. We will not increase the fragmentation of the world by expressing hostility towards one another. We will remember that at a level far deeper than our understanding, we have *communion.*”

While the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was not the first denomination to envision Christians in different countries receiving the Sacred Meal on the same Sunday, a Disciples, Jesse M. Bader, took the lead in promoting World Communion Sunday.

Neither the Christian Year nor the Revised Common Lectionary acknowledge World Communion Sunday. Hence, the lectionary readings for today do not lead directly to World Communion. However, as we try to show in these worship resources, the gospel text appointed for today can provide themes that are fruitful for preaching in a World Communion framework.

*[The following materials marked with an asterisk * were developed by Linda McKiernan-Allen and Ron Allen]*

Call to Worship*

L: Praise the Lord!

P: How good it is to sing praises to our God

L: For God is gracious. God heals the brokenhearted and binds us together.

P: Great is our Lord, and abundant in power

All: Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving, and praise God's holy name!

Opening Prayer*

God of mercy and of grace, you alone are God! This day, your people who follow Jesus gather around a table which stretches 25,000 miles, around the whole of Earth. Open our eyes, our minds and our lives that we might welcome one another, even as you continue to welcome us through the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. Fill us as we worship you. Then send us out to be the Body of Christ alive with the Good News of the Gospel. AMEN

Significant Quotes*

- In the mid 1930s the Presbyterian Church began to observe world-wide communion Sunday among Presbyterians. Jesse M. Bader, a long-time leader in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and serving in the old Federal Council of Churches (predecessor to the National Council of Churches) proposed a Worldwide Communion Sunday on which congregations of all denominations would partake of the Loaf and the Cup. The first such day was October 6, 1940. Bader liked to say that the communion table on World Communion Sunday was 25,000 miles long.

Recollecting the church embraces believers of many different races, ethnic groups customs, languages, and nations, Bader said, "*Worldwide Communion Sunday begins on the other side of the International Date Line, so that the observance starts first on Sunday morning in the churches of the Tonga Islands, Fiji Islands, New Zealand, Australia, and on and on towards the West during the twenty-four hours of the day. This significant observance around the world on the first Sunday in October has become a day of united witnessing on behalf of Christ, the head of the church. In a time when there is so much disunity, here is an opportunity to witness in a broken world to an unbroken Christian fellowship.*" [Jesse M. Bader, quoted in Elmer G. Homrighausen, "Cooperative Christianity in the Local Community," in Edwin T. Dahlberg, ed. *Herald of the Evangel* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1965), p. 118.]

- World Communion Sunday continued during World War II. While that time may seem long ago, an editorial in *The Christian Century* captures an essential element in the meaning of the day:

"While nearly all intercourse with that part of the Christian world community which lies within the shadow of the Axis powers of course effectively cut off for the duration of the war, there are reasons to believe that many of the churches of that area will join with those of the United Nations in observing this day in 1942 as they have formerly. Whether they do nor not, is

however, not the most important question. The fact that Christians in lands which are still free choose voluntarily to remember and reaffirm in the midst of war that there is a unity which holds together all elements of the Christian church is prophetic of a better day. The celebration of the Lord's Supper in a world-wide observance under these circumstances is an affirmation that the Christian church, even though it is in a world at war, is itself at war. Its fellowship is not sundered by the war but remains a living reality, bearing witness to the one God who is the object of worship in all churches and in all lands. It is a declaration of faith not the power of [human beings] who [are] doing everything conceivable to destroy the unity upon which [our] very life depends, but in the power of Jesus Christ . . . Finally, it is a prayer that through the grace of God the common experience of suffering brought by the war may be transcended and its multiplied wrongs forgiven in a new united effort to carry the redeeming word to the whole world when 'the tumult and the shouting dies.'" ["An Act of Corporate Faith," *The Christian Century*, vol. 58 (1942), p. 1109.]

Other Liturgical Material -- This is a day ripe for symbol.

- Visual expressions of the world might include a large globe on the communion table/altar, a map of the world on the screen or posted like a banner, flags from many countries posted around the sanctuary, or the congregation dressed in clothing from other lands.
- Consider using communion elements from another country or another tradition. You might use wine and wafers (remembering those in Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopalian settings), or grapes and rice crackers (remembering those who have trouble physically handling small cups, and recognizing there are places which do not have grapes or wheat).
- You might have bread from different lands (Irish soda bread, chapati, rye, French, barley).
- Add music from other nations. *Chalice Hymnal* includes many Spanish language hymns, indexed on page 831. [See the section (*below*) about music for other suggestions.]
- Use "A Litany for the World" (*Chalice Hymnal*, 664) from John Bell, Iona.
- Invite persons who speak different languages to share in the words of institution, or in prayer time.
- Invite persons from other traditions to share a vignette of communion in their congregation (intinction, small groups around tables, passing elements in the pews, moving forward to kneel and be served), or do a short "mime" with youth or others demonstrating how communion is shared in other places. This could be as elaborate or simple as you'd like.

Invitation to the Table*

On this World Communion Sunday, when we gather in this familiar place, we recognize and remember the great cloud of witnesses who also participate in this meal! Across time and space, the table extends to include people we may never know, yet with whom we are connected. And as we commune, we find our faith increasing, just as the disciples found so long ago.

When Jesse M. Bader conceived of World Communion Sunday, his idea was a mustard seed, but that idea moved the mulberry trees of the world's churches. When Martin Luther King, Jr., and the ministers conceived of the Montgomery bus boycott, the idea was a mustard seed when compared to the massive structures of racism in that city.

When we face the reality of hunger and poverty around the world, we can imagine Jesus' followers taking bread and cup, finding ways to plant seeds of food and seeds of hope. When we taste these elements, we can taste the goodness of well-fed sisters and brothers, and step forward to share from our abundance.

Just as Jesus assured his disciples that their faith (the size of a mustard seed) was sufficient to move a massive tree into the sea, so today we take this tiny bit of bread and small sip of juice (wine) and believe it is sufficient for great ministry in Jesus' name.

So come, for the feast is prepared and you are invited. "Come take the bread, come drink the wine, come, share the Lord" (from *CH* 408, *Come Share the Lord*).

Notes for Preaching (based on the readings in the Revised Common Lectionary for October 3, 2010)

Luke 17:5-10

It may seem tedious to the reader who has followed several of these resources for worship that we begin each discussion of a text from the Gospel of Luke with a reminder about how Luke views the world. However, this perspective is fundamental to Luke-Acts and we summarize it for the benefit of new readers.

From Luke's end-time (apocalyptic) point of view, the history of the world is divided into two ages—the present age that distorts God's purposes and that is passing away, and the coming Realm of God in which all things will take place according to God's desire for all those in the Realm to live in love, peace, justice, joy, mutual respect and support, community and abundance. For Luke, God sent Jesus to announce that the time of transformation is underway. Through the ministry of Jesus the Realm is beginning, though it will not come fully until the return of Jesus. After the ascension, the church is to continue the witness of Jesus, and is to extend that witness to gentiles. The church is to embody the Realm in its own life and is to invite others to join the community awaiting the final coming of the Realm.

Luke 17:5-10 is in the context of Luke's travel narrative which does double duty in the gospel of Luke (Luke 9:51-19:17). (a) It tells the story of Jesus leaving Galilee and going to Jerusalem (a highly symbolic place for Luke). (b) The journey itself represents the life of the church as it awaits the second coming. The church is on a journey from the present to the second coming, and along the way the same kinds of things happen to the church that happen to Jesus and the disciples in the travel narrative. For this reason Luke sometimes calls the church "the Way," referring to a group that is on the road.

On World Communion Sunday, the congregation becomes cognizant that it is not on the road to the Realm alone. The congregation is joined with a world wide community that is on the journey. The lection for today provides guidance for making that journey together.

In Luke 17, Jesus is teaching the disciples about how to live as representatives of the Realm of God while they are on the journey. According to Luke 17:1-2, the road will contain stumbling blocks that could deter those who would journey towards the Realm (“little ones”). But a harsh judgment awaits people who discourage faithful response to the Realm. It would be better for such a person to be drowned than to face the final judgment.

On World Communion Sunday, a preacher might explore stumbling blocks to Realm-like community within the church and within the larger world. This text is a warning: Those who obstruct the coming of the Realm will eventually find their own worlds collapsing. This warning applies to congregations, denominations, and movements as well as to individuals.

Luke 17:3-4 assumes that some in the community will sin, that is, will stumble on the journey to the Realm. In this immediate context, to sin means to turn away from the Realm and to embrace values and practices of the old age. In these verses, Luke suggests a pastoral action. The church is not to allow such a person simply to slip but is to rebuke that person. In this context, a rebuke is an act of pastoral care intended to keep the person in the Realm. When repentance occurs, that is, a change of attitude and behavior, the community is to welcome the dissident into the community. The number “seven” in vs. 4 is an idiom for “as many times as” and is not limited to a count of seven. As many times as such person drifts away, and repents, the church is to welcome them.

World Communion Sunday brings to consciousness the diverse breadth of world churches, and the remarkable diversity within churches that are located in the same nations, and even in the same denominations and middle and local judicatories. Churches, as well as individuals, can sin. For example, churches of European origin in the United States violate the Realm by engaging in racism. Such churches—like individual racists—should be rebuked.

In Luke 17:5, the apostles (the circle of the twelve) ask Jesus to increase their faith. For Luke, faith has a specific content. Faith is confidence that God is bringing about the Realm through Jesus. In Luke, as in Judaism more generally, faith is not simply an intellectual act but is a response of the whole self. To have faith is to live in the light of the Realm.

The apostles ask Jesus to increase their faith because they recognize the journey ahead is difficult. Jesus has just warned them that obstacles will obscure their way. Perhaps they are afraid that they will cause people to sin. While Jesus has just given them instructions for how to react to people who sin, these instructions will create confrontations in the community. The apostles—who are to be leaders in the community of the Realm—recognize that they need to be fully prepared for the journey ahead. They think they need more faith.

In Luke 17:6 Jesus corrects the apostles. The mustard seed, of course, was a proverbially small seed, but that is enough. The first part of the text could more naturally be rendered, “*Since* you have the faith . . .” because the grammatical construction in Greek expresses a condition of actual

fact. The apostles (and the church for whom Luke was writing) already have enough faith because the Holy Spirit operates through them to bring the power of the Realm to expression.

Luke launches into hyperbole by implying that they have enough faith to say to a mulberry (or sycamore) tree, “Be uprooted and planted in the sea, and it would obey you.” The sycamore tree was huge—growing as high as 60 feet—and it had a vast root structure. There is no suggestion that Luke wants the community to become a first century tree nursery service. Luke wants the reader to make an analogy with the Realm. The community already has enough faith that it witness to the Realm in ways that are as powerful and dramatic as moving a tree. In the Book of Acts, dramatic things do occur. The apostles and others heal. They are imprisoned but then God releases them from prison. The church grows dramatically. The gentile mission is huge success. Paul carries the gospel to Rome.

When Jesse M. Bader conceived of World Communion Sunday, his idea was a mustard seed, but that idea moved the mulberry trees of the world’s churches. When Martin Luther King, Jr., and the ministers conceived of the Montgomery bus boycott, the idea was a mustard seed when compared to the massive structures of racism in that city. The preacher might help the congregation identify their hopes and plans for the Realm that may appear to them as mustard seeds. Compared to the mulberry size problems in the world today, Word Communion Sunday itself may now appear to be a mustard seed.

Having just assured the apostles (and the church) that they already have the resources they need to do important and dramatic things in behalf of the Realm, Luke then uses the parable in 17:7-10 to remind them to remember that they are slaves or *servants* of the Realm. To be sure, today’s reader is rightly disturbed by the notion of slavery. While slavery in antiquity was not usually as horrendous as slavery in the southern part of the United States, it was still a difficult life that defied many of God’s purposes. However, storytellers in antiquity often made use of the owner/slave relationship, especially to speak of God and human beings.

Perhaps then, as now, some people in positions of leadership in the church (and in other groups) lose sight of the purpose of leadership (enabling the group to carry out its mission) and use their position of leadership to serve their own desires (e.g. for power, for ego-reinforcement, for financial gain)

As the parable begins, the reader is in the position of the land owner, that is, in the position to make things happen. The opening question presumes a negative answer. In those days, especially in a house with only one servant, the landowner would expect to the servant to work in the field in the day and then to prepare the evening meal. A landowner would seldom (if ever) invite the worker to come from the field to sit at the table for supper. Nor would the owner express special thanks to the servant.

By the time the parable ends, the reader is in the position of the servant (Luke 17:10). The servant has done what the servant is empowered to do: plow and prepare supper. The servant has not tried to claim glory and honor that does not belong to the servant’s role. In the view of some scholars, the NRSV has made an unfortunate translation in the servant’s statement, “We are worthless slaves.” Luke does not presume that the work of the slave is worthless. A better

rendering of the word *achreios* (NRSV: “worthless”) in this expression would be, “We are slaves to whom something is not due, or is not owed,” or more positively, “We are slaves to whom no additional favor is due” [J.J. Kilgallen, “What Kind of Servants Are We?” *Biblica*, vol. 63 (1982), pp. 549-51].

In the manner of the slave in Luke 17:7-10, the apostles and the church are to perform the work of the Realm as they journey from the present to the second coming. We are not to use church or the Realm as a place to gain special privilege. In the same way that the outcome for the servant was a continued place of security in the owner’s house, the outcome of serving the Realm is a continued place in the Realm. Given the fact that the power of the Realm can (figuratively) move mulberry trees, a place in such a Realm is quite enough.

While the parable does not deal with the Sacred Meal in a direct way, at least one aspect of the parable relates to a World Communion Sunday emphasis. All who come to the Table are servants. The world wide Table is a gathering of the servants of God. Our work is to plow the field of the Realm in the church and in the world, and to set the T/table for the meal.

The life of the church is to be a sign of God’s purposes for the world. World Communion Sunday is supposed to demonstrate the mutual support of all in the Realm. The Realm is a community of servants. All in the community of the Realm serve its purposes. These purposes including bringing into mutually supportive community people and churches that are even more different than the ones that commune together on World Communion Sunday. Given the fragmentation of the world today, being at such a table and part of such a Realm is both reward in and of itself and vision for the work yet to do. “We are servants to whom no additional favors are due. A place in the partially realized Realm of this Table is enough.”

Closing Prayer*

You have nourished us at this Table, God of Abundance. So now send us out to live abundantly, sharing your love, your grace and your peace, through the power of Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN.

Possible Hymns and Songs

(Numbers in parenthesis are from the *Chalice Hymnal*)

“Halle-Halle-Halleluja” (41)

“Dona Nobis Pacem” (297)

Spanish language hymns (indexed on page 831),

Consider singing through a variety of communion hymns (384-430), perhaps as the congregation comes forward to be served.

Additional Resources

- The web is full of possible resources. Here's one link:

<http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/abc-worldwidecommunionssunday.php> which opens the door to a variety of ways of expressing the worldwide nature of the day.

- One is a children's moment, when children are seated around a flat world map and asked where their ancestors came from. As each child responds, the leader lights a votive candle and places it on that country. Children are then invited to recognize their church family represents the world family.

The Writers

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