



World Communion Homily
 Scripture – John 3:16-17
 Preached by Anne R. Ledbetter
 October 2, 2011

Two ecumenical Christian celebrations were birthed by Presbyterians: On Super Bowl Sunday in 1990 at Spring Valley Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina, Rev. Brad Smith prayed for God to “help us remember those who do not even have a bowl of soup to eat.” The petition moved the hearts of the members, especially the youth who that day launched the first Souper Bowl Sunday of Caring. In the last 20 years churches have raised over \$50 million dollars in this grassroots effort to fight hunger.

World Wide Communion Sunday originated in 1933 in Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr, Shadyside’s pastor, conceived of a World Communion Sunday during his year as moderator of the General Assembly. The goal was to bring churches together in a service of Christian unity – remembering the importance of the Church of Jesus Christ and how each congregation is interconnected with another. World Communion did not spread as rapidly as Souper Bowl Sunday. The General Assembly adopted the practice in 1936, and the organization now known as the National Council of Churches endorsed World Communion Sunday in 1940. However it was during WWII that the effort really gained support and strength as people of faith found themselves trying to keep their world from coming apart. World Wide Communion Sunday symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense, emphasizing that we are one in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Do any of you recall first celebrating World Wide Communion Sunday? I remember as a youngster, thinking it was so cool that Christians all over the world were partaking in communion on the same day, doing what Jesus told us to do.

My home church in Louisiana observed communion only 4 times a year, the quarterly minimum required by the Presbyterian *Book of Order*. Things were not so different when I came to Delaware twenty-five years later, and discovered that Westminster celebrated communion only 6 Sundays a year. Then the Worship and Music Committee added an early service with communion to the summer worship schedule, and gradually gravitated to celebrating the Lord’s Supper the first Sunday each month. Over ten years ago I went to see a spiritual director for a time, and I remember saying to her, “I’m hungry for communion.” It was a time in my life when

I wanted to receive the sacrament at least weekly like Catholics, Episcopalians and Lutherans do. I remember seriously considering sneaking in to St. Ann's Church on Union Street, and taking the eucharist with all the old Catholic ladies at the morning mass... but I was afraid of getting caught. What about you? What does communion mean to you? And what word might God speak to us on World Communion Sunday?

This week a Christian website invited 9 contemporary Christian leaders to respond (in 100 words or less) to the question: Why do you take communion? Former PCUSA moderator Bruce Reyes-Chow replied: I take communion because it reminds me that the body of Christ goes far beyond those who circle the table in our little church; (and that the Spirit) compels to live in the world as if every person is a brother or sister in Christ." Dr. Epperly of Lancaster Seminary up the road wrote: "I take communion to join with my brothers and sisters in Christ across the globe, and then to embrace strangers and persons of other faiths. Communion is what the Celts describe as a "thin place", where we experience a holy, mysterious reality: God's everlasting life in our ever-changing world." While these testimonies are moving, the response that grabbed me came from a female pastor of a non-denominational church in Dallas. She replied, "I take communion because I am hungry for a place of radical acceptance, where the tragedies and hopes of life are confronted. I am hungry for food that reminds me God's love is so abundant it feeds the whole world."ⁱ

Is that what we taste here? God's love for the whole world?! John described it this way: God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, not to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved, healed, made whole.

For almost 80 years World Communion has been a Sunday where we (Christians) try to lower the walls that separate our communion tables of one denomination with those of another. But I suspect that our vision is too narrow, our dream too small. God does not love only Christians, God loves the world. While the Church through the ages has put order and stringent rules around the sacrament, God might remind us that this is Christ's table – the table of that crazy first century rabbi who ate with tax collectors and prostitutes, and viewed no one outside the scope of God's love. Jesus embodied God's radical hospitality and extravagant grace eating with outcasts and picnicking with the masses, but we have tried to make the table orderly and restrict God's most basic gift of food for a hungry world. Fortunately, the Holy Spirit continually prevents us from governing the exorbitant grace of this table.

Indeed, God must have thought us Presbyterians quite lamentable that General Assembly over 30 years ago, when commissioners hotly debated whether baptized children could come to the Lord's Table. Those against allowing children deemed them unable to comprehend the sacrament, as if any of us comprehend mystery! Fortunately, many churches today are realizing that we cannot gate keep God. As the bumper sticker reads, "God loves the whole world – no exceptions!" Jesus would print this one: "God sets a banquet table – no exclusions!"

St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco seeks to practice the radical hospitality of Jesus at each Sunday Eucharist. Their invitation is simply: "Jesus welcomes everyone to his table." It was here that middle aged, left wing, lesbian journalist Sara Miles,

experienced her conversion not simply to faith but to vocation – her calling and purpose in life. In her memoir *Take this Bread*, she tells it this way:

“One cloudy morning when I was forty-six, I walked into a church, ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine. A routine Sunday activity for tens of millions of Americans – except that up until that moment I’d led a thoroughly secular life, at best indifferent to religion, more often appalled by its fundamentalist crusades. This was my first communion. It changed everything. ... The mysterious sacrament turned out to be not a symbolic wafer at all but actual food – indeed, the bread of life. In that shocking moment of communion, filled with a deep desire to reach for and become part of a body, I realized that what I’d been doing with my life all along was what I was meant to do: feed people. And so I did. I took communion, I passed the bread to others, and then I kept going, compelled to find new ways to share what I’d experienced.”ⁱⁱ

When Sara was invited to share in preparing communion at St. Gregory’s, and serving the people, her conversion continued. She explains, “What happened once I started distributing communion was the truly disturbing, dreadful realization about Christianity: You can’t be a Christian by yourself.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Sunday’s communion continued to impact Sara until she went to her priest confessing that she had experienced what she could only describe as a vision – an internal, unrelenting picture of hundreds of diverse people singing and gathering around the table. Gradually Sara discerned that God was calling her to create a food pantry – not your typical pantry with forms to fill out and identification cards to show. Just a pantry where anyone could come receive a bag of groceries – rice, beans, bread, cereal and plenty of fresh vegetables and fruit. And the food was not stored in a closet or side room, but laid out on tables all around the altar where she had first tasted the unconditional love of Jesus. From the beginning Sara sensed that they were doing Christ’s work. In a letter to her congregation she wrote, “The food pantry has always been communion. Great Thanksgiving for a great love. It embodies the glorious disturbing reality at the very center of our church: Jesus’s Table, where all are welcomed without exception.”^{iv}

Friends, I wonder if today World Wide Communion points us not so much inward to our unity as Christians, but persistently outward to God’s beloved world and to *all* people. Maybe the crucial connections for our day lie not among Christian congregations, but in forging relationships with other faiths and people unlike ourselves.

This morning let us turn to Christ’s table, remembering our common hunger with all humanity. Let us come cognizant of God’s love not just for us, *but for the world*. Finally, let us be open and ready to be fed by Christ, transformed by grace and sent to serve.

ⁱ <http://www.patheos.com> October 1, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Sara Miles, *Take This Bread* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007) p. xi

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 96.

^{iv} Ibid. p. 248