

## **WORLD WIDE COMMUNION**

**OCTOBER 5, 2008**

We gather together in worship on this very special celebration day, World Wide Communion Sunday. The World Council of Churches, of which the United Church of Canada is a very active member, calls on all Christian denominations to celebrate this great gift from God, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. While some denominations celebrate this Sacrament each week and others celebrate it a few times a year, nevertheless this Sacrament, along with the Sacrament of Baptism, mark our church as Christian and is performed in every Christian Church tying us together in one great fellowship of faith.

So often as Christians we focus on the things that make us different from one another in our worship and in our interpretations of doctrine. However, no one disputes the centrality of these Sacraments in our faith journey, for by enacting these rituals, we remember again the great gift of God's love and forgiveness as illustrated in the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The World Council of Churches is urging all denominations to regard our unity, those things which bind us together, rather than accentuate those things which may divide us. What kind of a face do we present to the world if we only speak of our disagreements? World Wide Communion Sunday is to help us refocus on what really is important to the faithful worship of a gracious God.

Jesus spent three years trying to help move along religious leaders whose devotion to their faith he appreciated. However, he tried to illustrate that their deep commitment to format and ritual was the very thing which caused them not to fully appreciate the freedom there was in true worship of God. Why do you separate yourselves from all others so as not to contaminate yourselves by touching what you perceive to be unclean? God does not put these restrictions on you; you have created ways of doing things that separate you from the very God you worship.

Our first reading from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi has Paul addressing this very issue. Paul speaks to the purists, those who insisted on following to the letter all the built up rules of faith. Look at me, Paul writes, no one can be more attentive to the law than I have been. No one has more credentials than Paul has in what we would call the Old Testament faith. Paul is not afraid to parade out what this means. I was circumcised as all Hebrew boys, I was from the tribe of Benjamin, I was a Hebrew born to a Hebrew and I am a classically trained Pharisee. I was a zealot in the faith and I persecuted those who were not willing to follow the law, even the followers of Jesus Christ. Then he says this to them: Whatever gain I had by all this was but loss when compared to the gain in knowing Jesus Christ my Lord. Whatever I have lost because I have followed him is nothing compared to the gain I have had in knowing Jesus. No longer am I righteous because I follow the law so closely and faithfully, but now I have true faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I might know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Then Paul said that he does not consider that he has now made it to perfection, but he presses on because Jesus Christ has made Paul his own. Not consumed by the past or forgetting his journey so far, Paul strains forward to what lies ahead. He runs toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul's call to men and women was to no longer be a captive of the past or your past ways of thinking or doing things. Rather, capture the dream, capture the vision and strive with all you have, for God will reveal what is necessary for you to reach that goal.

Paul, though he spoke of his authenticity and therefore his right to speak to the Jews, was urging all to strive beyond what they knew towards the true freedom in God shown to all by Christ Jesus.

Paul felt strongly that men and women were liberated by faith in God as shown through the life, death and resurrection of God's Son Jesus Christ. Stop putting stumbling blocks in front of yourself or others – just know God loves you and calls you into a close relationship with God. The great news Paul proclaimed, was that Christ has shown the way and has presented the loving face of the Creator God.

Paul would point to the many parables and sayings of Jesus himself. We read this morning the Parable of the householder who established a viable vineyard business and then left for another land leaving hired help to run the operation. He sent servants to collect the rent and they were killed by the tenants. He sent other servants and the same thing happened. I know, said the owner, I will send my son: surely they will listen to him and pay me what they owe and pay me what rightly is mine. The tenants saw the son and killed him. He was the heir they said. Now we can take for ourselves what had been his inheritance.

What do you think the master will do when he hears they have killed his only son and heir? He will come and remove these bad tenants and give the vineyard to others who will honour their commitments to the owner. So, said Jesus, the Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to others who will bear fruit.

The people of Israel were not pleased to hear this. However, Paul was certain that the Kingdom of God was now available for all who truly believed and gave their lives to God and honoured Jesus the Son. God was indeed calling all people into a relationship with him.

Jesus, you may recall, said this: "Have you never read in the scriptures: 'the very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner; this was the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes'."

Paul, after the manner of Jesus himself, urged tolerance between believers. Accept one another rather than reject based on ways of the world. In the church, all are equal before God whatever the social, ethnic or religious backgrounds.

Both Paul and Jesus spoke of the need for true gratitude. When we come to the Lord's table as we will today, overwhelming gratitude for God's love manifested to us should be our key feeling. Out of that sense of gratitude emanates true thanksgiving and praise. As we focus on gratitude, it challenges us to look at the place gratitude holds in our lives over the course of the rest of the year. It is so easy to get caught up in pessimism and become cynical when we watch the news. So many people appear to have a negative view of the world. Gratitude helps us focus not on what is wrong with the world or what is wrong with people, but rather to focus on what is right – what is right in our world, what is right with people we meet.

Paul would say this same attitude is critical to the church as well as to each of us. There is a lot of bad press out there about the church and a lot of the negativity comes from church people themselves. Focusing on what is right about our church changes our mindset and others about our church. We do not help our mission if we speak negatively about our church and certainly it does not attract anyone new to it. There is so much about our church to celebrate and so much about which to be grateful is there not?

Paul worked so hard to get new and seasoned Christians to be positive in all that occurred in the church. Give it a chance. Are you so sure your viewpoint is the only one which is right? Is there any room for others when you are so prone to exclude? If I do not separate men and women from each other, why do you? I am the God who created all and all are of value and interest to me. Should you be the one separating from the others? No, your ministry as my people is to be there in the centre of things, not separated from the world but people clearly in the world influencing others for good.

So where are we as we come closer to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper?

First, we know that the invitation to the Lord's table is issued by God himself. It is his table and his right to do the inviting. Secondly, we know that God's invitation comes free of strings. God is well aware of our shortcomings and yet God invites us to partake in the symbolic feast. Thirdly, we know the price Jesus was about to pay when he instituted this Sacrament the night before he was arrested and placed on the road to crucifixion.

Take this bread and take this wine, symbolic of my body and blood willingly broken and shed for you. Share it in the company of fellow believers in my name and I will be in the midst of you.

Finally, we know we are not at the table through any merit of our own. God's invitation to faith and to God's table is a wondrously generous gift to which we can respond in gratitude and praise. Thanks be to God for his generous love!

Rev. Gary Magarrell