

A Table Set for the World

communion meditation

October 3, 2010

John 10:14-16

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The story is told of a man who dies and goes to heaven. St. Peter meets him at the pearly gate and takes him on a tour of heaven. He takes him first into a large, elaborate worship space where the priest is conducting high mass. "The people here," St. Peter tells the man, "are Roman Catholic." They move on down the hall a little way and open the door on a group of happy people lining up before an enormous buffet dinner. "These," St. Peter instructs the man, "are the people from Grace Covenant Church." They go a little farther and St. Peter quietly opens the door on a group of people in serious debate—you might even say, conflict. St. Peter quietly observes but doesn't say a word. "Who is this?" the man asks. "Shhh," St. Peter responds, "these are the _____ (I'll let you fill in a group). They don't think anyone else is here."

We laugh at the familiar story because it is just that—way too familiar. Aware of the tragic divisions in Christ's body that were damaging the church's witness in the world, Christians began coming together just over a century ago to join hands in cooperative efforts to bear witness to the one Body of Christ. Today we are pleased through our association with both the Alliance of Baptists and the International Council of Community Churches to join hands with over 100,000 local congregations in the United States to be a part of the witness of the National Council of Churches and through it, the World Council of Churches. For me, and I suspect for you as well, today's celebration of World Communion Sunday is not just perfunctory; it speaks to everything I believe about what God was doing in Christ and who we as Christ's church should be.

"We will be an ecumenical church," we proclaim in our Grace Covenant, "joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God's children." This morning we gather around Christ's Table remembering and celebrating and praying for sister churches spread around the world; and this morning we know that they in their many languages and cultures are also praying for us. I find that sense of connectedness, that sense of relationship and communion deeply, deeply meaningful. It says volumes about Christ's church and the Table around which we gather.

Jesus is the door to the church. In order to come together, churches have to strip away their non-essentials. Although each has its own interpretation of baptism and the Lord's Supper, church polity and a host of other distinctives, one foundational commitment binds churches together across our differences: a common commitment, as the confessional statement of the National Council of Churches puts it, to "Jesus Christ . . . as Savior and Lord." Jesus is the door to the church. He is, as John puts it, the gate to the sheepfold. We enter through him, and we are kept through him.

The shepherd was a common figure in the ancient world, and as such, plays a prominent role in Hebrew scripture, which speaks both of bad shepherds—rulers who trampled their own people in their grasp for power and wealth—and God as the good shepherd who walks with us through all the days of our lives. In choosing the Good Shepherd image for Jesus, John is speaking provocatively of the God of presence, the God who promises a day of peace and tender care. It was a message that spoke volumes to a people living under the thumb of a foreign despot. For its first three centuries, Jesus as the Good Shepherd was a favorite theme in church art. The image of Jesus carrying a lamb on his shoulders is still visible today in a fresco over the baptismal font of the earliest known house church. Jesus the Good Shepherd is painted on the walls of the catacombs, where early Christians sought refuge in time of persecution and buried their dead. Extending from the baptismal font to the tomb, the image of the Good Shepherd speaks of one who guides and protects us through all of life, from its beginning through its end.

Jesus' sheepfold is wider and more inclusive than we ever anticipated it would be. Knowing about John's depiction of Jesus as shepherd, however, is not the same as experiencing it. Far from any of our preconceived notions, the company that Jesus keeps and calls us to keep obliterates the walls of division we are so prone to erect. In her book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells the story of a newcomer to her church named Ken—a man who was suffering from AIDS who had lost his partner to the same disease. A few weeks after the funeral, Lamott reports, "Ken told us that right after Brandon died, Jesus had slid into the hole in his heart that Brandon's loss left, and had been there ever since. . . . He says that he would gladly pay any price for what he has now, which is Jesus, and us" [p. 64].

Lamott goes on to talk about a woman in the church named Ranola, "large and beautiful and jovial and black and devout as can be." Ranola had some difficulties accepting Ken and kept him at a distance. After about a year of standing back and observing him, one Sunday morning something happened. Ranola

watched Ken in worship one Sunday morning during the singing of the hymns. The congregation sang "Jacob's Ladder," singing in chorus, "Every rung goes higher, higher." Although he could not stand with the congregation, Ken sat in his pew singing vigorously. Then came the second hymn, "His Eye is on the Sparrow." Again, the entire congregation, save Ken, rose to its feet and began to sing, "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?" Again Ranola watched him skeptically until her face and heart were moved like his. She went to his side and lifting him like rag doll, "she held him next to her, draped over and against her like a child while they sang. And," Lamott confesses, "it pierced me."

Reflecting on the story, Kimberly Long also admits,

It pierces me, too, this idea—more than an idea—that Jesus can fill a hole that is left by some unbearable loss—and that this good shepherd can cause one sheep to be so overcome with love for an unlikely other that she becomes like a shepherd herself, taking care, giving succor, providing safety in her strong and loving arms" [*"The Shepherd Jesus," Journal for Preachers, 2006*].

"I have other sheep," Jesus said, "that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice." Some think his words may have pointed forward to the mission to the Gentiles, well underway at the time John is writing his epistle. And perhaps he was. But over my five decades as a member of Christ's Body, the church, I have experienced not once, not twice, but over and over and over again the surprising realization of just how far Christ's Body extends. Wall after wall has come down as beloved sheep I knew not of, but God in Christ knew, have come on my horizon and the horizon of the church. That, you see, just seems to be the way it is in Christ's open and loving church.

Jesus, Kimberly Long goes on to say, "leads us to the waters of baptism, and the font reminds us that we belong to him and to one another. He sets before us a table of love in face of all the world's pain, and we remember that we are fed along the way, not just for our own sakes but for the sake of others, too."

Welcome to this table of love, this table set for the world. But be conscious as you gather here. It will change you as the world that you know and accept enlarges and widens and grows through the light of the living and gracious God.