

A Table of Welcome

communion meditation

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Mark 9:33-41

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Our performance has been anything but stellar. If you look back over two thousand years of history, it's enough to make you blush. Arguments within churches and between churches concerning which church has got it right, which church is the *real* church of Jesus Christ, have scarred the church's image and tragically undercut its witness. It's as if we have been possessed of something of a Christian onupmanship—"an oxymoron," Daniel Clendenin suggests, "if ever there was one;" and I couldn't agree more. The Protestant Reformation, bursting on the scene in the sixteenth century, determined to get it right by putting the authority of scripture over tradition and hierarchy, only to become embroiled over the proper reading of scripture. Meeting on the mission field in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and increasingly confronted with the need to speak up on behalf of workers in the face of the uncompromising power and greed ushered in by the Industrial Revolution, churches began to come together in an effort to speak in one voice. The Federal Council of Churches was born, which eventually became the National Council of Churches; and the World Council of Churches was formed following the end of World War II.

Faced with increasingly dominant economic forces and two all-consuming wars and recognizing the damage that was being done to their witness by their divisiveness, churches began reaching out to one another. Acknowledging the differences in their structure and creeds and even in their practices of baptism and communion, they came together around a single affirmation of faith—Jesus Christ as Lord—and in commitment to live out their common calling. Today, the World Council of Churches, with which we are affiliated through our membership in the International Council of Community Churches and the Alliance of Baptists, is made of 349 denominations and national and regional groups, representing some 590 million people in 150 countries, including 520,000 local congregations.

World Communion Sunday has been a part of that evolution. First observed by Presbyterians USA in 1936, in 1940 the Federal Council of Churches (predecessor of the National Council of Churches) invited churches throughout the world to participate and World Communion Sunday became the occasion for Christians all around the world to live out the faith we proclaim: "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" and to pray for one another. And on this morning, I cannot help but be moved by the images in my mind of the wide diversity of churches—from the very large to the very small, from rural to urban to remote villages in the jungles and deserts, all gathering as the sun makes its way around the world. It isn't missing it much to say that at every moment of this day, Christians are praying in a multitude of languages and dialects for Christ's church universal.

"We will be an ecumenical church," we say in our Covenant of Grace, "joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will to bring healing among God's children." More than "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal," more than mere institutionalism that mouths a party line, these words, this promise and commitment is at the heart of who we are because it is at the heart of who we have experienced God in Christ to be. We gather this morning at this Table of Welcome, this Table where God in Christ extends hospitality to all who come seeking the God of love.

"Teacher," John proudly announced to Jesus, "we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Notice that John says "he was not following *us*." Contrary to how I've always read the passage, John's claim does not seem to be that the man is not following Jesus, that he is not a true believer, but that he is not following the Twelve. He is not recognizable as one of them. He is stranger, alien, not to be trusted. Interesting, isn't it, that this motley crew that Fred Craddock calls "the not-yet-ready disciples" are pictured only a moment before as unable to cast out demons; and now they are threatened by one who can? And isn't it interesting that Mark depicts these Twelve, who so recently heard Jesus' words of his impending death, degenerating into an arm wrestling contest over who was the greatest? "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," Jesus chided them. And taking a child into his arms, he goes on: "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me." If we would be in the company of the Jesus who sat so often at table with all the wrong people, we must get used to those he brings along with him, even those we feel most comfortable despising or at least, keeping at arm's length.

Be sure of Jesus' response to John's proclamation that he had told the unbranded healer where to go. Be sure, note that there is no equivocation in Jesus' words: "Do not stop him," Jesus commands.

No deed of power, no act of kindness, even if it is just giving a cup of water, goes unnoticed by God. The test, you see, is not about how we label one another. It is not about how successfully we exclude one another and beat interlopers down. It is about extending Christ's Table to serve even and most particularly, the least, those whom everyone else enjoys excluding.

It isn't about who is the biggest, the most powerful, who gets on TV the most, who masters political expediency in order to access the platforms of power. It is about those who bend to welcome the "little ones"—the child, yes, and in Mark's terminology, those who are newcomers into the church, whom others might prefer to exclude. "If any of you," Jesus goes on to say, "put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea" (v. 42).

Measuring ourselves by those we self-righteously exclude, proving our worthiness as the *real* church of Christ because of those we relegate to the outside, reaching for status or if nothing else, grasping for a simple peace of mind by building ever higher barriers against those whom we fear or despise is not the way to greatness or security in the Kingdom of God. The way, the only way if we would be followers of Jesus is his way. It is, in Kenneth Carder's words, the serendipitous result "of following the one who emptied himself and became a servant, the one in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free; but all are one" [*Christian Century*, September 10-17, 1997].

So, come to Christ's Table this morning, not as those who are haughty and proud, not as those who consider God as privileged to have you in God's camp. Come as those who know you are here for one reason alone. You are here, we *all* are here as those who have been welcomed here by the God of infinite love and grace and we are thereby commissioned to extend that same welcome, that same grace to others.

Table Blessing

Jan L. Richardson, taken from *In Wisdom's Path*

To your table you bid us come, O Christ.
You have set the places, you have poured the wine,
and there is always room, you say, for one more.

And so we come.
From the streets and from the alleys we come.
From the deserts and from the hills we come.
From the ravages of poverty and from the palaces of privilege we come.
Running, limping, carried, we come.

We are bloodied with our wars, we are wearied with our wounds,
we carry our dead within us, and we reckon with their ghosts.

We hold the seeds of healing, we dream of a new creation,
we know the things that make for peace,
and we struggle to give them wings.

And yet, to your table we come.
Hungering for your bread, we come;
thirsting for your wine, we come;
singing your song in every language,
speaking your name in every tongue,
in conflict and in communion, in discord and in desire,
we come, O God of Wisdom, we come.