

“Unity in the Church”

Date: October 5, 2014

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Theme: Christian Unity, Church

Occasion: World communion Sunday

Christians all over the world will receive the bread and the cup today: in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in Jerusalem, in London, in Russia and right here in Erie, Pennsylvania.

In small churches and in large cathedrals, in thatched-roof huts and in rented school gymnasiums, Christians will hear these words: “The body of Christ, the blood of Christ for you.”

This is World Communion Sunday. Throughout the world, churches of all denominations, in all nations and in many languages are celebrating Communion.

And it couldn't have come at a better time. With so much suffering in the world, we *need* this time to remember that our Lord also suffered. And we need this time to remember that he did so, on our behalf.

And he suffered and died, not just for you and me, but for our neighbors next door, neighbors across town, and neighbors around the world. “God so loved the world” begins the most memorable verse in the Gospel of John. It is as true today in our war-ravaged time, as it was in that age of unrest, more than 2,000 years ago.

The Lord's Supper teaches us about the *necessity* of unity. The Apostle Paul tried to get this point across to the church in Corinth. They were a divided church, and were following many different teachers and teachings.

Paul let them know, in no uncertain terms, that their divisions were unacceptable. He explained that to participate in the meal, while excluding others, or allowing divisions to exist among themselves, was tantamount to drinking and eating judgment upon themselves. Communion is serious business.

A story is told, of a head usher at a particular church, who went to his pastor with a problem. It seems that despite all of his prompting, he could not get people to stand close enough together at the communion table.

In a frustrated tone, he told the pastor how each time he sent the proper number of people forward to receive, but they never seemed to fit just right. "Some people leave 8 to twelve inches between them and the person next to them, which crowds up the ones on the very end."

In desperation, he threw up his hands and said, "Why can't people get close, even at communion?"

Perhaps the head usher's frustration points out very adequately the larger difficulties we face as we come together on this World Communion Sunday. The problem there was the few inches that separated the people at the communion rail.

But in the larger picture, it is far more than space that separates us. We in the church are kept apart by theology, politics, ministry, race, economics and the list goes on. Sadly, the differences we have between the churches are quite evident, even in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Some churches, like the Methodist Church, practice open communion, that is, they allow any and all to come to the Lord's

Table. Other denominations practice what is called *closed communion*, though they don't call it that. They simply do not allow you to partake unless you are a member of their denomination.

In some churches, communion is served every week. In others, it is rarely ever mentioned. We, in the Methodist tradition, traditionally serve the Lord's Supper once a month. And, it might come to a surprise to you, but some churches don't serve communion at all.

So, here we are on a day that is called World Communion Sunday. Some will say this day underscores how far apart we are. In most any city here in the States, well over 50% of the congregations do not even recognize World Communion Sunday.

So, some would argue, today simply highlights the *broken* body of Christ, not the unity of the Church. Why then bother to have such a day? Well, I think it's important that we celebrate this occasion, because it sends a message to the Christian community at large, that if there is *anything* that can and should bring us together, it is the Lord's Supper.

Paul was quite critical of the Corinthian church, with the rich excluding the poor from the holy meal. He was upset with all the divisions – some following Paul, some Apollos, some Cephas. And he said, 'when you partake of the bread and cup, you're bringing judgment on yourself. This is not how it's supposed to be.'

There is still much division in the body of Christ. Just drive through the streets of Erie and look at the church signs: United Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Orthodox, AME, Alliance, Assembly of God. All the different signs tell the story of a church that is not united.

I'm convinced that if Jesus came back to earth, he would sit down at the table and say, "Here is the bread. Take and eat. Here is the wine. Take and drink." There would be no litmus test to see who belonged to the right denomination. There would be no theological debates to see who had the right theology. It would simply be done.

At least, that is how I see Jesus.

Last week, we saw a beautiful demonstration of Christians coming together in unity – both at the Erie Insurance Arena and at the CROP Walk. Christians *can* come together and witness to their faith. And that is how it should be.

When Richard Nixon was campaigning in 1968, he was in upstate New York and happened to see a little girl holding a sign which read, "Bring us Together." You may recall if you're old enough, that he picked up on that and used it as his campaign theme.

Maybe when we come forward to receive the bread and the cup, someone should stand up and hold a sign before the Church which reads, "Bring us together." Yes, there are differences in the church, differences not only between the denominations but even inside the denominations. "Jesus, bring us together."

Unity is an ideal. It is not yet a reality. And yet, we insist that communion is not just an ideal. At its depth, it is reality. Christ has already reconciled the world to God, and each of us to one another. It is now our Christian task to live out that reality.

If we who profess the name of Christ cannot come together, then how can the world ever hope to come together? May it be so. Amen.