

Sermon – 10/7/18
A Table Large Enough for All
Mark 10:2-16
20th Sunday after Pentecost
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
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The first Sunday in October is designated as *World Communion Sunday*, which celebrates our oneness in Christ with all our brothers and sisters around the world. Thus it is appropriate that World Communion Sunday is also a time when we receive the annual *Peace and Global Witness Offering* as a way of continuing the ancient Christian practice of sharing what we have with brothers and sisters in need.

But did you know that *World Communion Sunday* (originally called *World Wide Communion Sunday*) is a gift of the Presbyterian Church to the larger ecumenical church? The first celebration occurred at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA, in 1933 where Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr served as pastor.

John A. Dalles, a PCUSA pastor who has researched the history of World Communion Sunday notes this in his blog entry, reprinted from the October 7, 2002, issue of *Presbyterian Outlook*:

. . . Dr. Kerr first conceived the notion of World Communion Sunday during his year as moderator of the General Assembly (1930). Dr. Kerr’s younger son, the Rev. Dr. Donald Craig Kerr . . . was sixteen in 1933. He has related that World Communion Sunday grew out of the Division of Stewardship at Shadyside. It was their attempt to bring churches together in a service of *Christian unity*—in which everyone might receive both inspiration and information, and above all, to know how important the Church of Jesus Christ is, and how each congregation is *interconnected* one with another. When [Dalles] asked Donald Kerr how the idea of World Communion Sunday spread from that first service to the world wide practice of today, he replied,

“The concept spread very slowly at the start. People did not give it a whole lot of thought. It was during the Second World War that the spirit caught hold, because we were trying to hold the world together. World Wide Communion symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense. It emphasized that we are one in the Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Celebration of World Wide Communion Sunday was adopted as a denominational practice in the Presbyterian Church (US) in **1936**. Churches in other denominations were invited to celebrate with us from the beginning, but it wasn’t until **1940** when the Department of Evangelism of the *Federal Council of Churches* (a predecessor body of the *National Council of Churches*) promoted extending the celebration to a number of churches *around the world* that the practice became widespread. Today, World Communion Sunday is celebrated around the world (with hundreds of millions of people in hundreds of thousands of congregations).¹

And, at a time when many of us sorely feel division, stopping to share in an act of unity is a welcome pause.

Let’s pause here and see if we can come to a deeper, clearer understanding of what Communion (the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, the Mass) is all about.

The word “Eucharist” is how Episcopalians, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, some Lutherans, and some Presbyterians refer to the meal others call the Lord’s Supper or Communion. It is from two Greek roots, “*eu*,” for “*well*,” and “*kharis*,” for “*favor*” or “*grace*.” Thus, Eucharist, that is, “*gratitude*,” means “*well-favored*” or “*good grace*.”

¹ <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/special-days-and-emphases/world-communion-sunday/>

It is the central ritual of Christian community, considered the most sacred moment of Sunday worship. Participants eat bread and drink wine (juice)—in what most call a “sacrament”—to reenact the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples on the night before he died.²

Christians, of course, have differed about the explanation—whether the bread and wine (juice) are changed into Christ’s body and blood, or whether the body and blood of Christ are present “*in, with, and under*” the bread and wine, or whether the meal is a “remembering.” [But in all these understandings,] the human products of bread and wine (juice) become a means of *grace*, earthen vessels whereby the sacred becomes present to us.³

But there’s more. Bread is blessed and shared, a reminder that food is a gift from God, the gift that gives life to our bodies; wine (juice) is blessed and shared, a reminder that drink is a gift from God, a gift that gives joy to our souls.

In fact, the Christian celebration echoes those ancient Hebrew festivals [Passover, Pentecost, Purim] in which the Jews recognized and received God’s gifts of *abundance* and, with humility, returned *gratefulness*.

In other words, it’s a reminder that everything is a gift. *Bread* is a gift; *wine* (juice) is a gift; *life* and *joy* are gifts. No one can ever pay them back. God never withholds. All we can do is *receive*—in awe of such favor and grace—say thank you to the Giver, and then “pay it forward” with humble service to others. Eucharist. Gratitude. Thanksgiving.⁴

Which is a perfect segway to our Gospel reading this morning—a story in which Jesus elevates the status of both *women* and *children*.

You see, Roman society had little use for children. The precariousness of their lives made it easy to disregard them. And since they were not “productive” members of society, they were often ignored, abused, abandoned, or sold ... Jesus, however, not only says that children are important in God’s realm, but uses them as examples of citizenship in God’s Kingdom.⁵

Nevertheless, despite having said this, the children were being prevented from coming to him by his disciples. As the text says: “... when Jesus saw this, he was **indignant** and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them’” (v. 14).

This past week a new online data tool called the *Opportunity Atlas* [was made public that] finds a strong correlation between where people are raised and their chances of achieving the American dream.

Harvard University economist Raj Chetty has been working with a team of researchers on this tool — the first of its kind because it marries U.S. Census Bureau data with data from the Internal Revenue Service. And the findings are changing how researchers think about economic mobility.

People born in the 1940s or '50s were virtually guaranteed to achieve the American dream of earning more than their parents did, Chetty says. But that's not the case anymore.

Researchers hope these data will help communities understand and tackle the barriers that prevent people from climbing the economic ladder out of poverty. They want policymakers to use the information to offer new solutions locally.

Charlotte, N.C., has gotten a head start on this effort. The city has enjoyed strong economic growth over the past couple of decades and many people assumed the progress had been shared across the city. But in 2014, Chetty and his colleagues released data showing that Charlotte was dead last out of 50 cities at providing upward mobility for low-income kids.

² Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, Harper One, New York, 2018, p. 120

³ Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, Harper, San Francisco, 2003, p. 58

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*, Harper One, New York, 2018, p.121

⁵ William B. McClain, *Preaching God’s Transformative Justice*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, pp. 430, 431

Dr. Ophelia Garmon-Brown, a prominent Charlotte resident, wasn't surprised the city had done poorly.

"I've been a physician for a lot of years, worked with people who live in poverty, so I saw it," she says. But Garmon-Brown says she was among those who were shocked that Charlotte had come in dead last.

The news came as a loud wake-up call.

And Charlotte responded, Garmon-Brown says. She was drafted to co-chair a task force, formed by the Foundation for the Carolinas, to develop a plan to attack the problem.

The task force's report identified early childhood development, college and career readiness, family stability and strong social networks as key factors that enhance upward mobility. It singled out segregation as a key obstacle. And now, Charlotte officials are learning to use the Opportunity Atlas to effectively target some remedies, things like pre-K programs and affordable housing.

"The Foundation for the Carolinas have brought a lot of partners to the table to think about how to act on these data and I think that's the power; it's in the community collaboration and the community partnership," said Frank Barnes, Chief Equity Officer for the Mecklenburg County Public Schools.

Charlotte is already taking significant steps in that direction. Mecklenburg County has committed to providing pre-K for all children. And the city has a \$50 million bond issue for affordable housing on the November ballot. Matching private donations could boost the total to over \$100 million.

Harvard's Chetty says he hopes the Opportunity Atlas will help nonprofits, policymakers, and communities across the country make better decisions.

Biblical scholar, John Dominic Crossan, describes Jesus' strategy as one of "*free healing and common eating*." He suggests that one of Jesus' primary methods for teaching his vision of the Kingdom of God was through what Crossan calls "*open commensality*" – that is, through sharing egalitarian meals with his listeners. In the first century, the *banquet table* was an apt symbol of society in miniature. First century Jewish society was structured with an unassailable hierarchy, and this hierarchy could be seen during meals when women served men at the table and never vice versa, lower classes and slaves never shared a meal with the powerful, and sinners never ate with the pious—and children were no-where to be found. The banquet table, then, contained all the same *oppressive barriers* as society at large. Crossan suggests that Jesus symbolized his message of radical egalitarianism through eating with slave and free, male and female, sinner and pious, sick and healthy. He brought every class of person to his table. Crossan states: "...healing and eating were calculated to force individuals into unmediated physical and spiritual contact with God and...one another."⁶

Eucharist. Gratitude. Thanksgiving. Come to the Table. *All* are welcome. There is room for *all*.

⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, Harper, San Francisco (Revised), 2009