

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
October 7, 2018

John 17:20-23

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Communion Meditation

So today is World Communion Sunday. Observed each year on the first Sunday in October, this day calls the Church to be the universal, inclusive Church. The day was first observed by Presbyterians in 1936, adopted by the Federal Council of Churches in 1940, and shortly thereafter observed by numerous other church denominations including the United Church of Christ.

So once again we have our old globe by the communion table, to remind us of people around the world taking part in this holy meal. We have our simple table cloth of grass huts, to remind us that churches don't have to be huge cathedrals -- a church today is anywhere there is a table and bread to break, a cup to share.

What's more, our basket today holds bread of different varieties. Baked this morning and prepared yesterday by Jenny and Will Healy, Trace and Will Sears and our friend Dan Frederick This morning we have Somalian flatbread; A flatbread from India, also called Naan, Jamaican Roti, also a flatbread; and Mana'essh: a flat bread from Palestine topped with a spice rub called za'tar, a combination of sesame seeds, ground sumac, dried thyme and sea salt.

There is our bulletin cover to help us celebrate. What do you see? There are hands of many colors helping to hold up the world. If there ever was a time when we know we need to work together This is it. If there was ever a time to realize that a God of love works across barriers of country and race, this is it. We might look at this image and think of God, see it as an image of God – this spirit of togetherness, this spirit of mutual uplift.

And then there is Jesus prayer. In John's gospel he'd been doing his teaching, and his healing encounters with people. Suddenly Jesus shifts to saying goodbye to those he loves, and for a long time. two whole long chapters, Jesus speaks about not being able to stay here on earth, and about the overall importance of love. Then it all shifts to prayer. Jesus prays that just as he has known oneness with God, this deep connection so his followers should know that too. He prays that in being so connected to God, they will experience unity, and that that unity would be a sign to

the world of God's power. "That all may be one" is Jesus deep prayer for believers.

What does this mean? Surely, we have reason to wonder today. Today we still have so many denominations, though there are signs the different churches are working together more than before. Does it mean we should just be one big denomination?

Think of our church. Right here we don't all think the same. Some of us are wide open to different worship practices, for instance coming forward for communion, as we have begun to do more regularly here. Others not so much, we like it to be kept familiar. We have different ways of thinking of God – some use the pronoun "He", while others avoid that, sure that God is beyond gender. And some of us are Republicans, and others, Democrats. We understand our government and its priorities in different ways. Some of us are insistent Red Sox fans, and others root for the Yankees.

We have among us many differences. So, what is all this unity talk?

First, we should say *that unity is not all the same*. Jesus did not pray, make them all think alike, make them all talk alike, and while you are at it, make them all look alike, give them all the same skin color or make them all male, or make them all female. He prayed that despite our differences, we would be one – of one heart and mind. What this means, as one commentator said, *is that we do best when our hearts and habits are wide enough to include others*.

This is why, here at our church, we regularly say "Whoever you are, and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." It's a reason why we feel it is important that our children be present for the Lord's Supper. It's a reason why our confirmation class today will go to visit the mosque in Quincy – we are trying to stay curious about other ways of coming to God, trying to learn more about what the faith of those who worship in mosques and temples is about—because when you think about it, if God is God, can there really be a separate Jewish God, a separate Muslim God, a separate Christian God?

Jesus prayer was that the world could look at Jesus followers, and in seeing how they loved each other, how they practiced forbearance toward each other, how they valued each other, the world would see God, which to put another way, *the world would see God's Great Inclusive Love*. Jesus prayer is also that just as close as Jesus was to God, we can be that close too. This is what we catch a glimpse of at the table. Jesus gave us this meal, so that just as bread and juice come into our bodies, we would know in every part of us the fullness of God's love. We would know that a God of Love wants to live in each one, in each and every person.

On this day there is no American way of experiencing communion, There is no high church or low church way of experiencing communion No Presbyterian, Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, United Church of Christ way of communion There is one bread, one body, one church, one Lord.

If it is an ideal, a vision and not yet a reality It is still one worth lifting up, worth celebrating in hope.

So, I have a story to tell you. I offer it in hopes that it helps you enter more fully into the spirit of this day.

I was sitting at my desk earlier this week when a plaintive voice hit my ear. It was a British plaintive voice, a woman traveler who badly wanted a tour of our sanctuary. "Your church isn't open?" She said to our office administrator. "In our country all the churches are open for tours." "I can't get a tour of the church?" She said. "That is very disappointing." She must have said "that is very disappointing" about three times. Then she upped the ante. "Well, I shall have to give you a bad review on Trip Advisor" she said.

At this I grew curious. I left my desk and walked into Shellie's office space to meet this insistent traveler. Shellie was there looking at this woman with a frustrated look. Don Reinhardt was there too, explaining how it simply wasn't possible to have people available all the time to show people our building. He too looked frustrated.

The woman just looked like a woman...maybe anyone's mother or aunt. I wasn't wanting to be the hero, but I did feel sympathy about her desire. (Maybe it's the fact that I am about to go on a trip) She had come across the ocean, for goodness sake. She clearly loved churches – and hoped to tour many connected to Pilgrim heritage. So I said I'd give her a quick tour. "Ten minutes" I said. It was in the midst of a busy week, and Shellie and Don kind of looked at me like I was nuts. But off we went, the insistent woman and me. We came across Town Square, with my beginning "the tour" before we ever set foot inside.

Once inside, she got this look of awe on her face. This is beautiful she said, looking around. She was interested in everything, how the Unitarian split happened, how our windows were opaque, so that people in worship could focus on the word of God, why we had the banner up we had up for September, how many people regularly worship here, and what we were planning for the year 2020. She let me know she had a female pastor, a good one. It was so meaningful to her-- all of it. The tour might have been just a little more than ten minutes, but soon I was back at my desk, and the insistent tourist was on her way. "You are a better person than I am" Shellie said to me.

But here's the thing. At week's end, once the woman was back home, she wrote me the nicest thank you note (an email) about making time for her. She learned so much on her trip. And getting inside our beautiful church was one of the highlights. The insistent woman turned out to know something about practicing gratitude, and I was glad in the end to have met her.

On this world communion Sunday, I have the words of a hymn floating in my brain: *"Help us accept each other, as Christ accepted us, teach us as sister, brother, each*

person to embrace. Be present, Lord, among us and bring us to believe we are ourselves accepted and meant to love and live."

I also wonder this: Is God perhaps as insistent as that woman from England?
Insistent that we make the journey from our small bubble to the wider world
Insistent that we see one another as brothers and sisters
Insistent that at this particular moment we not shut down, we not give in to despair

Insistent too that we come to this table believing it is indeed our task, our calling to live into this vision, this prayer of Jesus that we may be one.

Amen.