

What Connects Us

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Emmanuel Friedens Church, Schenectady NY
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Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20
Philippians 3:4b-14

I need to add a third reading today, from March 23 1980, the last lines of the last sermon of Archbishop Oscar Romero, who the following day was killed as he stood at the communion table about to serve the bread and cup.

I would like to make a special appeal to the men of the army, and specifically to the ranks of the National Guard, the police and the military. Brothers, you come from our own people. You are killing your own brother peasants when any human order to kill must be subordinate to the law of God which says, "Thou shalt not kill." No soldier is obliged to obey an order contrary to the law of God. No one has to obey an immoral law. It is high time you recovered your consciences and obeyed your consciences rather than a sinful order. The church, the defender of the rights of God, of the law of God, of human dignity, of the person, cannot remain silent before such an abomination. We want the government to face the fact that reforms are valueless if they are to be carried out at the cost of so much blood. In the name of God, in the name of this suffering people whose cries rise to heaven more loudly each day, I implore you, I beg you, I order you in the name of God: stop the repression.

The church preaches your liberation just as we have studied it in the holy Bible today. It is a liberation that has, above all else, respect for the dignity of the person, hope for humanity's common good, and the transcendence that looks before all to God and only from God derives its hope and its strength.

World Communion Sunday is not a commonly known religious holiday in North America. We don't have World Communion sales at the malls; we don't get a Monday off from school. There are no World Communion Sunday greeting cards, so far as I know, in the Hallmark selection. Incidentally I checked online for greeting cards. And indeed SOMEone has designed one. You don't wanna go there.

It isn't well known and it hasn't existed that long! Nonetheless, World Communion Sunday, begun only in the twentieth century, is observed in churches around the world, a tangible reminder as we break bread and share the cup that we who gather in cathedrals and country chapels, in refugee camps and villages and inner city neighborhoods, are indeed all one in the body of Christ.

My own first memory of World Communion Sunday was listening to a preacher in India, as a child of about nine. He observed that on World Communion Sunday, around the world, for twenty-four hours straight, folk were gathering for Sunday morning worship, breaking bread, drinking from the cup, a day-long gathering at the table of God's love. This image has stuck with me ever since. Last night, as I readied myself for bed, in my hometown in India, they were preparing the elements, for Communion. The feast had begun.

Yes, yes, we are all one, but what is it that connects us? It is a long way to India, or Thailand or Fiji. I mean, some days it is a long ways from Schenectady to Albany!

Often when we go looking for what ties us together, what binds us, as people of faith, we go looking for common principles or beliefs. For example, the ten commandments, which we read this morning, are for some folk the foundation stone of all faith, all civilization. Some want them posted in courtrooms, despite the separation of church and state.

I don't want to get into deep discussion about the ten commandments, today, except to say that we need to balance respect for their universality with reality about their limitedness. After all, they protect the rights of the slave owner and the patriarch. They say little to nothing about the rights of women or the evil of holding any human being in perpetual servitude. It takes a leap of theological imagination to get from the Exodus passage we read this morning to the understanding that Jesus endorsed and rabbis before him took—to reinterpret them as the great commandments to love—to love God, with all we have and are; to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Rules can be good, as far as they go—and yet they are always limited, and they are not timeless. In the words of James Russell Lowell,

“New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth,

They must upward still and onward, who would keep abreast of truth.”

Unless we consider the *commandment to love* a rule, it isn't rules that connect us together as followers of Christ gathered at the table around the world today.

But then what is it? For me that question once again became personal as I gathered with Baptist sisters and brothers in a church in Utica, New York for the last couple days. For the first time ever it was a bilingual gathering of this group, as almost every word was interpreted into Sgaw Karen. Karen participants hosted and helped lead the gathering. Now some of you may be wondering: what is “Karen”, and why does this make it personal for you, preacher?

For two hundred years, American Baptist churches and missionaries have worked among the people of Burma—and continued to stay connected even after missionaries were expelled by the junta in the early 1960's. So there have been many many Baptists who are Burmese, for most of that time.

The Karen people are one of many ethnic minority groups in Burma. Karen people have long been persecuted, just for being Karen. For the last fifty years they have been locked in mortal struggle to maintain their identity and just to stay alive. They have been

subjected to forced relocation, slave labor, torture, landmines, starvation, rape and murder by government forces. Many have fled through the mountains and jungles to the relative safety of Thailand, where they have lived behind fences in refugee camps for a generation. And in 2004 they started arriving in the US in thousands as refugees.

In 2006, the first Karen refugee arrived in Rochester New York...and the first pastor to find out was yours truly, thanks to a phone call from Pastor Mark Caruana, the pastor of the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Utica, where our meeting was this weekend. Mark's phone call plunged me and Lake Avenue Church into a new adventure, one that brought refugees to our doorstep—hundreds.

I still don't speak more than a few words of Karen, but I have married Karen, baptized Karen, and gone backpacking Karen. I have led bible studies on Karen living room floors, and I own more Karen shirts than you can imagine. I wear Karen today...not out of nostalgia, but to honor on World Communion Sunday the witness of an ancient and honorable tribal people who continue to practice love and fight for human rights for their comrades.

So I guess you could say it's gotten personal, this question of what ties us together in Christian Unity. What unites us, poor farmers who have had to flee for their lives, with middle-class North American Christians?

Oh and speaking of personal questions, here's another, for this person who has been the pastor of African American as well as white folk for almost thirty years—what ties us together, right here in America, Christians who dare to claim unity despite the legacy of four hundred years of obscene racial oppression? What is it that connects us? Sometimes there is more distance from one end of a city street to another, one house to the next, than there is halfway round this old globe.

This question of what connects us, what legitimate worthy thing can and ought to connect us in the name of Christian unity...it has gotten personal.

Sitting there this weekend, at a church convention, listening to my Karen sisters and brothers sing, listening to my young brother Daniel interpret for hour after hour—an exhausting task joyfully undertaken without complaint, and without relief—I've gone back to the well—the deep well. And there is an answer that rises up.

We drink from that well here at the communion table. The only power great enough, the only love deep enough to connect us broken divided human beings is the kind of love that we learn from Jesus Christ. The only faithfulness profound enough to truly connect us at the deepest level, to stand with suffering struggling humanity, is the faithfulness we learn at the cross: only this kind of love, only this kind of readiness to give up influence and power and even divinity, for the sake of humankind.

A long time ago, the apostle Paul figured out what it would take to save his sorry soul. He needed to find the connection with his fellow human beings, and with his God. It

wasn't going to be his privileged status either as a member of the tribe of Benjamin or his citizenship in the Roman Empire. It wasn't going to be his meritorious observance of the religious orthodoxy of his day—not right belief nor right practice. It was rather by finding the *heart of Christ*, the heart of one who was ready to lay down his life for his friends—and be friends with any one at all. That's what it was going to take. And Paul figured out that in this was joy, in this was his redemption, in this path lay his liberation, in this was his salvation, in this struggle was the path to resurrection. He wasn't going to earn his way to heaven. He was going to get there by a better way, what Martin Luther King liked to call, quoting Paul in Corinthians, “that still more excellent way.”

Now there are lots of folk going around calling for Christians to find unity—and they will tell you that the source of that unity is to love God, and be one in Christ. But I am trying to say something more. We Christians only have one kind of unity worth finding—and we need some Holy Spirit help to find it.

Here is where our unity lies—we need to love the Christ who is in every single one of our fellow human beings. We need to love like Jesus Christ loves.

Many will tell you that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. But I say to you, in the name of Jesus: we need to learn to bow like Jesus. To bow but not to break! We need to learn how to suffer for our friends—and for our enemies—like Jesus. We need to learn to confront unjust power, like Jesus. We need to learn to forgive like Jesus. We need to learn to insist on compassion, and practice it ourselves, like Jesus. We need to stand with the woman about to be stoned and confront hypocrisy, like Jesus. We need to be ready to take the rocky road, like Jesus. We need to learn how to eat a joyful bit of bread with a stranger like Jesus; we need to learn to drink deep from the joyful cup of community, a community of strangers who are strangers no more, like Jesus.

This is the way of the cross, and in this is the path to resurrection. And in this is our unity: our salvation, our liberation, is tied up with that of every human being our path crosses. Whether our lives be long or short; whether we get to know friends from other parts of the world or only overcome the barriers dividing the homes and neighborhoods of this little city, in this lies our unity: the kind of love we learn from Jesus Christ.

Come to the table of love. Taste the bread of communion with your neighbor—who could be any one. Drink deep from the cup of the new covenant: liberation for the prisoner and justice for the poor. Amen.