

A Modest Proposal

Isaiah 25.6-10a

World Communion Sunday
October 25, 2009

Where is the church? The church of Jesus Christ is
where home is, is where heaven is,
is where a picnic is communion
and people break bread
together on their knees.

- Ann Weems

The Reading

⁶On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. ⁷And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; ⁸he will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. ⁹It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. ¹⁰For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation that begged for a witty retort and, sure enough, it came to you ...an hour later. Oh! Why didn't I think of that an hour ago? I've known my share of these situations; but once, I'm proud to say, just once, the perfect response rolled spontaneously off my tongue. I'll never forget it. I had just arrived at an obligatory family Christmas dinner, the lone college student adrift in a sea of aunts and uncles, when my aunt Edna looked me over, obviously objecting to the way I was dressed, and said, "Bobo you look like you just crashed somebody's party." Without thinking – what was I thinking! – I drew from the hip and said, "Aunt Edna, if I were going to crash a party it sure wouldn't be this one!" Well, that's it; that one experience represents the sum total of my spontaneous wit. That's it, in fifty eight years of living, that's my one claim to fame.

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I mention this long lost triumph because I find myself at a loss for words to address the topic of world communion and the notion of Christian unity. But someone has! In fact, in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize several years ago, Jimmy Carter concluded with an expression that says everything I would like to say about Christian unity. With simple eloquence he said, "The bond of our common humanity is stronger than the diverseness of our fears and prejudices. God gives us the capacity for choice. We can choose to alleviate suffering. We can choose to work together for peace."

Oh, isn't that good! I wish I had said that! but I didn't ...so I'm going to stumble over words, circle the topic, and try to express my thoughts on an emotional topic – a crucial topic – with some degree of coherence and integrity. Before I begin will you pray with me?

Gracious One, make us keenly aware that you are present with and for us; that you do indeed yearn to transform our lives, revitalize our thinking, give us the courage of our faith, and – at times perhaps – even inspire wit. We will be satisfied, however, with your presence as we reach out to each other. In the name of the Christ we pray. Amen.

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? The chicken? Boy, you seem sure of that. The chicken or the egg; that's a brain teaser, huh? I feel confused that way when I think about grape juice and communion. That's right, grape juice and communion. As a child I loved them both; so, which came first? Did I love grape juice because I loved communion; or, did I love communion because it included grape juice?

I didn't get a whole lot of real grape juice when I was a kid. My family wasn't flush with cash. We had lots of grape Kool Aid, but little of the real stuff; so any time I had a chance for grape juice, I jumped at it. And, yes, that included at church following a communion service. I was one of those kids who volunteered to help collect cups from the pew holders, because I could finish off anything left. It thrills my heart to see some of our kids – like Jake and Christy Reiter – helping clean up after communion. They clearly love it, and I'm glad the tradition continues.

Communion or no communion, I did love grape juice. I remember the thrill I always felt when we stopped at Mr. Pass' "Fillin' Station" on our way to Grandmother's house. By the way, if you don't know what a filling station is, check with me after worship. I loved to stop at Mr. Pass' station, because he always gave the kids a free Co'Cola, which in the South could be

anything from Pepsi to Root Beer. It was all Co'Cola! I remember reaching into the cooler and pulling out – you guessed it – a Nehi Grape Soda or, even better, a Grapico. Oh, I did love it. To this day I'm not sure if I loved grape juice because I loved communion, or if I loved communion because I loved grape juice.

Bottom line; who cares? Maybe my practical love for grape juice influenced my love for communion and, if so, that's fine. At least I got there. Sometimes small, practical steps precede and build toward the grand, symbolic gestures and historic accomplishments. Perhaps we wouldn't even get there if there weren't small steps we could take; easy accomplishments that move us in the right direction. This is true, I think, of Christian unity. We tend to begin the discussion with highfalutin ideals like universal peace, compassion, and justice. We have a tendency, and in this I include myself, to talk about the lofty ideals of peace and justice. We dream on a universal scale; so much so that our steps never seem to catch up to the ideals. Perhaps that's what President Carter was trying to say in his Nobel acceptance speech; there are times when it might be better to be practical, when it might be better to take some small but real steps towards unity, justice, and peace.

This is true of World Communion. The celebrations of Christian communion and unity that have occurred around the globe this month are belied by the simple fact that many of the conflicts in our world have often divided – and still divide - Christians. There are Christians Squared off against Christians ...today. There are Christians condemning Christians in the harshest of terms ...today. Thus, I think that in place of a lofty discourse on World Communion; in place of sketching an inspiring vision of universal peace; I will make a modest proposal for peace and unity.

I once saw an anti-war poster whose message struck me and has, indeed, stuck with me through the years. It read simply, "A modest proposal for peace: let Christian's stop killing each other." This, I think, is advice we can use. This modest, practical proposal would be useful in our culture. I'm not thinking so much about the armed conflicts that ravage our world; conflicts that are as horrible as they are plentiful. I'm thinking about something a little closer to home. I'm thinking about the polarization within our society based on ideals and ideologies;

polarization based on the absolute insistence that “I am right” and “They are wrong.” This polarization is splitting Christians; pitting them one against the other.

There are sincere individuals who share our confession of faith in Jesus as God’s Christ whom we oppose bitterly, whom we fight fiercely beyond the walls of our church. They may even be seated close to you today. Thus, I have a modest proposal to offer, a proposal that would help us take a step toward unity by simply refusing to be a part of that polarity; by simply refusing to fuel the fires of fear, anger, and hatred; by simply refusing to take a hard line based on ideology; by refusing to ignore the image of God shining in the face of the other and choosing, instead, to listen and to converse. We don’t have to agree to be in communion. Ann Weems is right. In response to the question, “Where is the church?” she responds, “The church of Jesus Christ is where people can disagree and hold hands at the same time.”

I think we could take a gigantic step toward unity if we would simply refuse to be a party to the hate mongering, name calling, and demonizing that’s so popular these days. It’s really not that hard to do. If you listen closely to the talking heads on TV and the pundit voices on the radio, you will see that they’re pretty transparent, they’re pretty ludicrous, they’re pretty absurd; and yet they are mongering fear and inciting people to anger and hatred. I’ll be honest, I’m sincerely afraid that our current situation may spill over into violence; and I don’t know about you but I will not be a party to that. I’m not going to demonize anyone. I’m not going to abandon my perspectives, mind you, but I’m not going to insist on my perspective above yours; I’m not going to insist on my way or the highway.

I refuse to insist that we can have unity and fellowship when you agree with me. Unity doesn’t work that way. That’s not unity; that’s domination, subjugation. There is an option, however, and this option inspires hope in me today. There is an option; there is a middle ground between a rigid left and a rigid right on social issues, morality, on any issue that faces us. There is an alternative to radical left or radical right. Do you know what it is? You may not believe this but I’m convinced it’s true; Liberalism.

That’s right; you can be Liberal and hold to middle ground. Does anybody remember the classical definition of Liberal? From time immemorial, a Liberal has been one who thinks

deeply about issues; who humbly tries to get outside of her or his narrow opinion; who listens to all sides of an issue before drawing a conclusion.

I'm not sure we can resurrect the label "Liberal," because it's been co-opted and understood in such harsh and simplistic terms; but the attitude of classical liberalism is exactly the attitude that we should take into our encounters with others on the street corner. Rather than insisting that I'm right and everyone else is wrong, each of us can approach issues on their merits. I know this is hard to do; especially if you depend on various media for news coverage and, especially, for attitudes and opinions on the news. There are plenty of people out there, both on television and radio, who gladly tell you what to think and do. I don't often give advice, but on this issue, I have some advice for you, and it's simple. Anyone who relieves you of the responsibility to decide for yourself what you think should be shunned; anyone who offers to relieve you of the responsibility and privilege of making up your own mind about issues; anyone who wants to short-circuit your reflection, your discernment, your conversation with others by demonizing or mongering fear and hatred; anyone who does these things should be shunned. Find another news source.

It's a small step, refusing to be a part of the polarization in our society. It's a small step, but you would be surprised how much ground we could cover if we all took that step. If we decided to recognize sisters and brothers on the basis of the divine reflection in their eyes; if we decided to recognize them as children of God and to talk, to listen to their hopes, fears, and aspirations; and together to seek God's vision for our life together.

I wish I could have said it as well as Jimmy Carter, but I mean very much the same thing. The bond of our common humanity is stronger than the diverseness of our fears and prejudices. Perhaps that's the secret of Christian unity, recognizing that the bond of our common faith is stronger than the diverseness of our fear and prejudice. As we celebrate a worldwide communion on this day, I pray that will be our experience.