Sermon – October 1, 2023 World Communion Sunday

I want to start with a story, a story about what heaven and hell are like. In this story, the inhabitants of hell are guests at an incredible banquet. The table is laden with gourmet foods, delectable desserts, and a wide variety of beverages. The table literally creaks from the weight of the food. The air smells amazing, promising all kinds of good things to those sitting around the table. Doesn’t sound too bad, hey? Here’s the catch: all the guests at the table have long forks and spoons attached to their arms. This makes their arms long enough to reach the food but too long to be able to get the food in their mouths. They can’t feed themselves, so they sit at this feast, desperately hungry.

If that’s hell, what’s heaven like? Heaven has the same tables laden with food, all kinds of savory and sweet dishes. The folks around the table also have the same forks and spoons attached to their arms. None at the table can feed themselves. But here’s the difference: in heaven the guests are happy and full… they figured out that if they used their long utensils to feed one another, everyone could get enough.

Food is not a new subject for stories relating to our faith. The Bible is full of food stories. It starts with Adam and Eve and continues with Moses. Our Exodus story this morning, has the continuation of the Israelites story where they learn that God so often provides for them in unexpected ways. While they are busy complaining, God feeding them with manna and giving them water from rocks. Simple bread and water offered without punishing the grumbles and complaints. A fulfillment of God’s great dream of all creation having what it needs to thrive and survive. We could say that we celebrate this dream every time we celebrate communion together – simple elements given freely so that we can know love and nurture spiritually and physically.

It's world communion Sunday – that day in our calendar where Christians across the globe celebrate communion on the same day. Some traditions have communion every week, some have it every month, some more infrequently. But on this day many mainline denominations will celebrate communion and it will take a full 24 hours to complete the meal. Those of us in Canada come late to the feast, which began a day ago in the Christmas Islands as we were enjoying our Saturday. As we ate lunch the feast moved through Seoul and Beijing, then Singapore and Bangkok. As we played and worked in the afternoon, it moved through New Delhi, Nairobi, Baghdad. It moved through Istanbul and Athens, Jerusalem, and Johannesburg as we had our evening meals and readied ourselves for sleep. In the middle of our night, the banquet moved through Paris and Dublin, through Buenos Aires and Boston. Then as we awoke to a new day, the banquet moved closer through Havana and Halifax as we breakfasted it reached New Orleans and Mexico City. Finally, we celebrated together with others in our time zone before sending it to Anchorage and Honolulu… And then, World Communion Sunday is complete.

We can thank the Presbyterians in the States for the tradition. In 1930, the Rev. Dr. Hugh Thomson Kerr was the elected moderator of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church of North America, which allowed him the opportunity to travel and visit churches across the country hearing differing opinions about the wellbeing of the church. When he returned to his home congregation, he decided he needed to do something to bring the church together. After some thinking and required church committee consulting it was decided that all the churches of Pittsburgh would be encouraged to hold Communion all on the same Sunday as a way of unifying all the churches in the region. There was no way for the Rev. Dr. Thomson Kerr could imagine that this sharing of communion experiment would grow into a ritual that would happen annually around the world. That first shared communion happened in 1933, by 1936 I was denominational practice and in 1940 it was promoted by what would be become the National Council of Churches as global tradition.

Initially a way of joining churches in a particular region in a common sacrament, this annual world communion service has become a meal symbolizing a yearning for peace and unity throughout the world. We are reminded that we do not do this communion thing alone, and that the tables around which Christians gather are not ours but are God’s. The bread and the cup no matter what form they take remind us of our connection with Christ, reminding us of the consequences of refusing to give into the powers of the world while doing our best to bring God’s love into the world.

When the Christian world gathers around this table, we remember together that Jesus died and rose again reminding us that love is stronger than hate and death, that forgiveness is stronger than fear, and that hope can overcome despair. As we celebrate, we acknowledge that God took a chance and gave us a very human rabbi Messiah. This humanity means that Jesus has connections to all humans, all around the world, calling us, all of us – Czech and French, Israeli and Palestinian, North Korean, and South Korean, English and German, American and Afghani, to embrace not only the Christ, but each other. For each person we meet is made in the image of God.

Through this meal we are called and enabled to see in all faces, Christ’s face; in all hands, Christ’s hands; in all smiles, Christ’s smile; in all tears, Christ’s tears; in every table, Christ’s table.

This is an act of radical reversal… the turning of enemies into neighbours; hate into love; violence into peace. It is the kind of reversal that brings about equity and justice so that God’s abundance can be found.

As we get ready to celebrate communion together and with the world, I want to end with some words from preaching professor and theologian Fred Craddock. He says: “If I understand communion right, our communion with each other, and with God, and with Christians around the world, then the distance from here to any Christian sibling, is precisely the width of our table. As you come forward to receive the bread and wine held out to you by another may you see, not the front of this church, but the faces of our siblings around the world, and just across the table.”

May it be so. Amen