

“How Big is Our Table?”
Spirit of Peace UCC
October 2, 2011
Scripture – 1 Corinthians 12: 12-27
Rev. Jean Morrow

1 Corinthians 12: 12-27 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

I have just finished listening to popular book “The Help” on CD. There is an absolutely charming part in it where one of the black maids, Abilene, is making up a story for little Mae Mobley, the 3 year old white girl she is basically raising. Abilene tells the story of an alien who comes to Earth for a visit...a martian named Martian Luther King. Of course, the martian, Mr. King, can’t understand why we let the color of our skin divide us.

Got me thinking about how an alien from outer space might respond to the variety of Christian churches we have on this Earth...and I have a feeling that the extraterrestrial visitor would be turned off by Christianity.

I don't think it would be the beliefs we profess or the doctrines to which some subscribe...my guess is that it would be the lack of unity that exists among disparate denominations and churches that would be most unsettling.

If the alien had read the Gospels in preparation for the visit, then he or she would surely know that unity of the human family is an important aspect of our faith. Yet, many of our churches appear to be at war with each other. Moderate and liberal churches are repulsed by the rigid dogmatism and political agenda they see being promoted in conservative and fundamentalist churches. On the other hand, conservative and fundamentalist churches are infuriated by the generic, anything goes theology and the social agenda that they sense is being professed in moderate and liberal congregations. Then there are churches of the same theological orientation that are estranged from one another because they cannot agree on certain aspects of the faith.

This is nothing new. Christianity has a sad, lengthy and sometimes brutal history based on doctrinal disparity. Terry Jones of Monty Python fame observed that the Jesus' teachings boiled down into a simple phrase is that we are to love one another, yet Christians have spent the last 2,000+ years killing each other because we cannot quite agree on what he actually meant by that.

Communion is no exception. It strikes me as ironic that Communion, which is meant (among other things) to unite Christians around a common table, often divides us along denominational lines. As many of us know, some denominations and churches only allow those who are members of their particular denomination or church to receive communion.

World Communion Sunday gives us an opportunity to re-examine our understanding of communion. Actually, it might be confronting us about what we really think about ecumenism – that churchy word that examines the covenantal relationships (or lack thereof) between Christian denominations. Wikipedia defines ecumenism as referring to initiatives aimed at greater Christian unity of cooperation.

The United Church of Christ, in many respects, is an experiment in ecumenism. The UCC is a young denomination with deep roots. Formed in 1957 as a result of the merger of four distinct denominations, the UCC was seen as a monumental event in modern church history. Church historian, Louis Gunnemann interpreted this coming together of denominations as “a special witness in this day...and of

dedication to the broadening and deepening of God's Kingdom in and among" all people.

Furthermore, many people joining the UCC today come from a myriad of faith traditions. If you are willing, stand up when I state the denomination you grew up in: United Methodists, Presbyterian, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Reformed Church, Lutheran, UCC or one of its denominational roots, other.

I'm not a fan of the concept of melting pot, as in America being a melting pot. I much prefer salad bar as the metaphor for our rich culture. But when it comes to the United Church of Christ, melting pot works. The UCC is a melting pot of American Christianity. But not the kind of melting pot the simmers everything down into a gray mass. No, I'm thinking it is more like a melting pot that softens the edges, so that we might come together as one body...arms will still be arms...feet will still be feet...ears will still be ears...but where the various parts meet the body, they sort of melt together. If the UCC is, indeed, this kind of melting pot, it may be one of the defining hallmarks of who we are and why we exist as a denomination. In fact, in 1973, the delegates to General Synod passed the statement entitled the "Ecumenical Stance of the United Church of Christ." In that document, the delegates (lay and ordained representing the entire church) said this:

"Ecumenical commitment and involvement...as with all Christian life, involve costs of time, energy, and fundamental risk. Nevertheless, ecumenicity is not an option for us; rather it is a mandate that prohibits a restrictive view that would separate mission from unity, or unity from mission."

This is quite a statement...quite a tall order to live into as a Christian. But it does call us to a higher commitment to ecumenism.

Our theological demographics – that we are a denomination made up of people from a variety denominations – this needs to be reflected in our sacramental theology: we need to continue to be a church that welcomes people from a diversity of backgrounds to our table. World Communion Sunday challenges us to see all Christians as our sisters and brothers living in the same Spirit that lived in Jesus the Christ.

But we know this isn't all that easy. There are many people who claim a Christian identity that we would have a hard time sitting down with at the communion table...and who would have a hard time sharing this great feast with us.

What did Jesus mean when he prayed for unity among all his followers? What did Jesus mean when he asked us to pray for our enemies?

Today, Christians all across the world are sharing the bread and cup of communion as if we were sitting under one roof around one gigantic table. Is our table big enough to include everyone. And when I say everyone, I mean everyone. As I eat the bread of life and drink from the cup of blessing, this is the question I will be asking...am I doing my part to soften my edges so that the table of welcome and blessing is indeed a table of welcome and blessing for everyone? Can I take the time, energy and risk to strive for Christian unity while also striving for our mission: to be a progressive, inclusive, diverse congregation that explores faith to inspire compassion?

For those who might suggest that being a Christian...and being a progressive Christian...and being a progressive Christian in the UCC is an easy path, I would say...not really.

Today, we approach the table of welcome with Christians from around the world. May our celebration truly be an enactment of the prayer that Jesus offered for his followers, the prayer that is so deeply loved in the UCC, that they may all be one...that they may *all* be one. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.