

One in Christ  
John 17:20-23

Today is World Communion Sunday. It is a time to celebrate Christian unity. Of course, we have to ask, “What unity? In what way are Christians united?”

We are not united in organization. There are literally hundreds of Christian organizations and denominations—all the way from the Roman Catholic Church, which has about one billion members, down to the little house churches, which have six to twelve people getting together in someone’s living room, and assuring one another that despite 2,000 years of history and two billion other Christians, they are the first real Christians since New Testament times.

We are not united in doctrine. Every denomination has a little bit different understanding of the gospel truth, and most of them are certain they are absolutely right and everyone who disagrees with them is wrong, while those of us who are more enlightened understand that we are not absolutely right and everyone else is absolutely wrong, we are just more right than everyone else.

We are not united in what it means to live as Christians. Some believe that as long as you obey the Ten Commandments and keep your personal life free from scandalous behavior, you are doing all that Christ wants you to do. Others believe that Christ is more concerned about transforming society than he is your personal morals. And there are a few who believe that it is important to live both a personally and a socially moral life in order to be true to Christ.

I would throw up my hands in despair over the state of the Church if it weren’t for one thing: Christ has never given up on the Church. Christ loves the Church—the whole Church. And the Church loves Christ. Christians are united in one thing, and one thing only. We all share an allegiance to Jesus Christ and a love for Christ.

A couple of weeks ago I reminded you that Christ said that wherever two or three are gathered together in his name he would be among them. Every Sunday as we gather, we celebrate Christ’s presence among us. The Spirit of Christ is present with us. We believe that the elements of Communion represent the very real Presence of Christ among us. We enter into an even deeper, closer communion with Christ as we receive the elements of communion.

What we need to remind ourselves is that Christ does not just enter into our gathering here in Chapelwood. The Spirit of Christ is present in every Christian assembly. Every church celebrates communion in some form, and every church experiences communion with Christ as they receive this sacrament.

Now, we know that many churches don’t believe this. Many believe that they, and they alone, have the Presence of Christ among them. That’s all right. There is a little poem I learned in Sunday School. It goes something like this:

He drew a circle that shut me out,  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But Love and I had the wit to win,  
We drew a circle that took him in.

Some churches draw a circle that shuts us out. We could be angry about that. How dare they think they are better than us, that God has rejected us because they have rejected us? We'll go you one better—We believe God has rejected you because you have rejected us. So there. Nyah, nyah, nyah, nyah!

That's all right for children in the faith, but not for mature Christians. The truth is that God has not rejected any of us. Christ is present in all our churches, even the ones who deny that Christ is present with us.

This morning we are drawing a circle that draws them in. As we receive Communion, we are joining Christians everywhere. This is one big altar rail, going throughout the world. We are coming before the altar in union with all Christians everywhere, even the ones who don't want to share Communion with us and who would deny that they are in fellowship with us. That's all right. We will let them think that they are the only ones.

Do you remember the story you were told as children? It's about a Christian who died and went to heaven. St. Peter welcomed him in and gave him a tour of heaven. They came to a large room. It was filled with smoke, and there were a bunch of people sprinkling water on each other. The Christian asked St. Peter who they were. St. Peter said, "Those are the Catholics."

They came to another room. There were people in there drinking wine and reading together in unison. "Who are these?" the Christian asked. St. Peter said, "They are the Episcopalians."

They came to another room in which people were dunking each other in a pool of water. "Baptists," Peter said. The man nodded and said, "That's what I figured."

They came to another room in which people were eating fried chicken at a pot luck supper. The man said, "You don't need to tell me who those are. I'm a Methodist, and I know Methodists when I see them."

Then they came to another room. St. Peter signaled the man to be quiet, and they tiptoed past the door. When they were a safe distance away, the man said, "And who were they?" And St. Peter said, "That's one of those churches that thinks they are the only ones up here."

When I first heard that story, I thought, "Why didn't St. Peter force those folks out of their room to see that there are other people in heaven besides them?" Over the years, as I've come to understand better God's love for us, I've come to understand that God really does allow us to live with our misperceptions until we are ready to see the truth.

There are those folks who really do have a need to think they are God's chosen ones and that God has rejected everyone else. It's not our job to try to force them to see the light. They are like baby puppies. It would be cruel to make them open their eyes before they are ready to see.

We will not march down the road and break into the services of another church and say to them, "We will give you no choice but to allow us to take Communion with you." That would not be a Christian thing to do. That would not be a loving thing to do.

But just because they are blind to God's all encompassing love doesn't give us the right to close our eyes to the truth. We shouldn't reject people just because they have rejected us.

And we don't. This morning we are drawing a circle that takes them in. And we are doing it in such a way that they don't even know it. We are taking Communion in our own church this morning out of sight of those who would never dream of taking Communion with us.

But we know that we are in communion with them. The same Lord who is present in our Communion is present in theirs. We are one in Christ, whether they know it or not. We will love them because Christ loves them. We will pray for them. In union with Christ, we are drawing a circle that takes them in.

And we are praying for the day when all Christians will be united in their love and acceptance of one another, so that the world will know that Jesus is truly the Son of God.

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