

Sermon

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World Communion Sunday, October 2, 2016

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4 & 2 Timothy 1:1-14

One Body, One Faith, One Spirit—Many (UCC) Expressions

“Justice never prevails!” the prophet Habakkuk complained. “Violence always seems to win! How long, God, before you fix this mess?”

Here’s how God answered Habakkuk: “Write the vision of justice in big, bold letters, so that even someone who is speeding by will be able to read it. Make it plain because God’s vision is true.”

The Timothy addressed in our Epistle reading was wondering some of the same things as Habakkuk. “How long, God, before your people stop being persecuted for speaking about the ways of Jesus?”

“Don’t be ashamed or afraid,” the letter-writer tells him. “We’ve been called into a holy way of living through grace, a grace given by Christ even before the beginning of time—even without having to earn it-- for God’s purposes. Keep speaking God’s grace in big, bold words, so that even those who want to thwart God’s purposes will notice. Make it plain, because this grace is the truth.”

World Communion Sunday is one way Christians have been writing God’s vision of justice and grace in big, bold letters since it was first conceived in 1936. This day reminds us, whoever the particular “us” is, that all Christians--across the globe and across time—are connected through the breaking of bread as Jesus instructed at the last meal he shared with his disciples. No matter our differences, we have in common this visible outpouring of God’s grace at the table.

For the United Church of Christ, forged by an ecumenical partnership of two denominations in 1957, the recognition of World Communion Sunday is a natural fit. The scripture verse from the Gospel of John “That they all may be one” is included in our denominational logo.

For the UCC, unity doesn’t equal conformity. Consider this often cited declaration: “In essentials unity, in nonessentials diversity, in all things charity.”

Communion as one of two sacraments (the other being baptism), is one of those essential, unifying tenets of the denomination. Communion is a visible sign of the grace, forgiveness, and presence of God in Christ. It represents both a memorial of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and a joyful reminder of the ways in which God has been, is, and will be at work in, with, and for the world.

Yet, even as the UCC believes that communion is one of those unifying factors in the Christian faith, it understands that “. . . expressions of that unity are as diverse as there are individuals.”¹ This is why you will find different communion practices among and within UCC congregations. Some churches use only wine or only juice or both. Some use the practice of a common cup, while others use small glasses or intinction. Some use the language “The body Christ; the blood of Christ” exclusively during the distribution of elements, while others use this language sometimes or never. Many congregations allow everyone of any age to come to the table, but some do not allow children to receive communion. Some allow only their members or

¹ *Who We Are and What We Believe* published by the United Church of Christ.

those who have been baptized to commune, while most do not have such restrictions.

Differences of communion practice reflect a congregation's particular history, tradition, and theological emphasis. This variance speaks the non-hierarchical nature of the denomination. Congregations are allowed to determine their own faithful interpretation of theology and practice in their own context, as they understand the Holy Spirit's prompting.

This "congregational polity," as it's called, produces both blessing and challenge within the United Church of Christ. Yet, we choose to be in covenant with one another, even when we disagree. One of the predecessor bodies that merged to form the UCC put it this way: "It is our belief that entire unanimity of opinion upon matters of theological doctrine and ecclesiastical polity is unattainable so long as 'we see through a mirror darkly' [as the writer of I Corinthians² phrases it], but that a unity of love, forbearance, and cooperation is fully within reach of all true Christians."³

To show unity of love, forbearance, and cooperation—even amid differences—*is* one way to boldly proclaim and live God's vision. This kind of unity is something we aspire to here, within the Madison Christian Community. Advent and Community of Hope have differing identities and practices yet are called to *be* the body of Christ—together—for the sake of the world. Given the escalating climate of intolerance, suspicion, and hate that is part of our culture, our witness to unity is critically needed.

Christians gather at the table of Christ as the *one body* of Christ. By doing so, we assert that all are equally called to the meal and all are equally welcomed—by God through us. This is a radical act of justice-making and grace. Through it, we remember and imitate Jesus' own empire-challenging, status-quo-rattling, sacrifice-demanding ministry.

MCC, let's continue to be that bold, vision-writing community of unity grace and justice and mercy and compassion for the sake of the world! Amen.

² I Corinthians 13:12

³ In *The Evolution of a UCC Style* by Randi Jones Walker, p 155.