

First Congregational Church, UCC Buena Vista

October 1, 2017

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One Table: 2.18 Billion followers

Philippians 2:1-13

Holy Spirit may you be in my words and in the space between my words that all who are present here today might hear your word that dwells deep within each and every one of us. Amen

According to most recent data polls there are 2.2 billion adherents of Christianity on the planet. That's about a third of the population who in some way connect, relate, wrestle, identify with the story and tradition of Jesus. On world wide communion Sunday, we take a moment and remember that we are connected to those 2.2 billion people in the Christian household.

In previous years I would come to this Sunday and love the opportunity to envision all of us across all of our differences, different cultures, different backgrounds, different beliefs, different races, different languages, different interpretations of scripture – coming together around the one table and celebrating the risen Christ in and among us. Beautiful! I love that! But as I started preparing for it this year its like the realist in my kicked in – who are we kidding? Have you seen the state of the Christian church lately? We can barely maintain the United in our own denomination, other denominations are splitting, and there are plenty of Christians who are not celebrating world wide communion Sunday today and who refuse to come to the table with fellow Christians because their doctrine, their theology, their interpretation is the only right and true one.

In the last five months as I have been visiting our congregations I am particularly aware of how this most recent political season has thrust so many of our churches into the difficult territory of having to navigate through previously hidden now exposed differences that run through their communities. All the polarization and politicization that is happening out there is inevitably affecting what is happening in here. As much as I love this vision of world wide communion the truth is we are a pretty divided church.

But then as I turned to the scriptures for this Sunday and I read the Paul's letter to the Philippians I remembered this is not a new challenge for the church. The church at Philippi, like most of the churches that began to form in those earliest days, was also divided. We don't know all the details, we don't know what they

were arguing about or what they were divided over, but its clear in Paul's letter that he was addressing their conflict. And this is what he tells them: let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Notice what Paul does not say – he does not try to help them figure out who is right, or tell them to form a committee so they can figure out once and for all which side they are going uphold, he doesn't tell them to be of the same opinion, or the same class, or the same political party. He says if there in any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, and sharing of the Spirit, may my joy complete be of the same mind, having the same love being in full accord and of one mind – the mind of Christ. The wisdom of Spirit.

The point it seems is not about uniformity. He is not interested in sameness. The goal here is not to be free from good and honest and respectful disagreement. Of course there will be differences. Of course there will be conflict. But you and I both know there is a different between a conflict grounded in love, and a conflict that is not. The goal is not to be the same. To be in agreement. Or to avoid conflict. The goal is compassion. The goal is to love. As your banner says, LOVE is still the way. The goal is to be in relationship in such a way that the goodness and grace of God can be felt and see and heard right here in our very midst. And so Paul is admonishing the church at Philippi – be united in this: that you each seek to dwell in the mind of Christ. The mind of humility. The mind of service. The mind of love.

Whatever was going on in that church, Paul turns the focus from out there to in here. It is easy to want to put the focus out there – to criticize what is wrong with those who don't agree with us, or see like us – it is easier to find voices that confirm what we already believe and then be able to make a stronger stand against those who believe differently. I get that. I can press that like on facebook as good as the rest and feel that sense of yeah – that's right.

But the gospel that Paul has come to know and love, the gospel that you and I seek to live, it asks something different from us. It asks us to go inward. We haven't always been that good at helping people do that in the Protestant church. But its a central part of our tradition.

To take a look at our stuff. To acknowledge both our light and shadow. Our goodness and our capacity for evil. and somewhere along that journey we discover

this kernel, this truth, this knowing, this wisdom of God that is within us and beyond us and we slowly learn how to live by this wisdom. We learn how to let the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus. Paul often said it this way, we die to the false self and rise to the Christ within us. And it is from this place, this mind, this spirit, that we go outward. It is from this place that we learn to see with eyes of compassion. It is from this place we are called into relationship with one another, even those, especially those, that we might think of as other or enemy.

That is not to say there is never a time to take a stand, or to be part of a movement, or speak out for justice – but I do think the gospel requires us to always do so with a great deal of humility, recognizing we never know the whole story. I recently heard a quote by Pope Francis who said: First see with the eyes of compassion, then act. It is my experience that people's hearts open far more often when they are listened to, rather shouted out. Be of the same mind as Christ.

As sure as I am standing in this space, this is what I believe the Spirit is calling us to do. When I look out at our world today we don't need more shouting we need more spaces where hearts can be opened. I believe the church can be that space. I believe we have inherited a faith that gives us the capacity to be communities of goodness and grace where the transforming Love of God is experienced and lived out in the world. We don't get to choose what happens in the world but we do get to choose how we respond. Each one of us. Every day. Every moment.

I want to close with a light hearted story that came from an anonymous parent who writes:

Last week I took my children to a restaurant. My six-year-old son asked if he could say grace. As we bowed our heads he said, "God is good, God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would thank you even more if Mom gets us Ice Cream for dessert. And liberty and justice for all! Amen!"

Along with the laughter from the other customers nearby, I heard a woman remark, "That's what's wrong with this country. Kids today don't even know how to pray. Asking God for Ice Cream! Why, I never!"

Hearing this, my son burst into tears and asked me, "Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at me?"

As I held him and assured him that he had done a terrific job and God was certainly not mad at him, an elderly gentleman approached the table. He winked at my son and said, "I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer."

"Really?" my son asked.

"Cross my heart." Then in theatrical whisper he added (indicating the woman whose remark had started this whole thing), "too bad she never asks God for Ice Cream. A little Ice Cream is good for the soul sometimes."

Naturally, I bought my kid Ice Cream at the end of the meal. My son stared at his for a moment and then did something I will remember the rest of my life. He picked up his Sundae and without a word walked over and placed it in front of the woman. With a big smile he told her, "Here, this is for you. Ice Cream is good for the soul sometimes and my soul is good already!"

This is a fabulous story for all kinds of reasons. What struck me this time was the response of the boy to the person who criticized him, and the response of the boy to the person that saw him and acknowledged him. One shut him down and one opened him up.

If I could give any advice to a congregation today it would be this: encourage one another to do the inner work that will lead you to become people who open one another up rather shut one another down. Help one another discover the mind of Christ, the presence of Spirit that is within each and every one of you.

Because when I think of 2.2 billion of us would I rather that we all agree, or that we learn to love? Can you imagine what the world would look like, feel like, and sound like with that kind of love on the loose in the world? Can you imagine if that is what 2.2 billion Christians were known for? Their love?