

World Communion Sunday Meditation

Scriptures: Exodus 17: 1-7
Philippians 2: 1-13

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day (as I told the kids) on which we Christians in the Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox traditions celebrate our unity in Christ and our oneness as children of God all around the world. The idea for this ecumenical celebration was first conceived back in the 1930's by the Rev. Dr. Hugh T. Kerr, who served as the moderator of the United Presbyterian Church (USA), and who later went on to become the president of the National Council of Churches and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The 1930's were troubled years in the world, not unlike our own era, when the clouds of war and conflict were building on the horizon. Rev. Kerr saw the need back then for the church to affirm the unity of humankind and to emphasize the parts of our Christian faith that unite us rather than divide us. Over these past 80 years, World Communion Sunday has become a widely observed part of many Christian denominations' liturgical traditions, and it also has become associated with peacemaking initiatives and our efforts in the Church to build a climate of international cooperation and respect for one another's various traditions of faith.

"Make my joy complete," writes Paul to the early Christian congregation at Philippi in Greece. *"Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."* Philippi was a Roman garrison town at an international crossroads, full of all kinds of people, from Greeks to Jews to Macedonians and traders from all around the Mediterranean world. The congregation that Paul had founded there was a hodge-podge of Jews and Gentile converts to Christianity. They were struggling to learn how to get along under one roof and how to affirm each other's ways of doing things with a sense of unifying respect and mutuality. *"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,"* Paul writes to them. It's this selfless, merciful kind of love that God intends to be the example for how Christians should relate to one another, both at home and around the world. *"Let each of you look not to your own interests,"* he admonishes them, *"but to the interest of others."*

Diving back into our Old Testament lesson for this morning, the Israelites camped at Rephidim in the wilderness of Sin had a long way to go to attain this level of harmony and faith. It sounds like they weren't thinking about anyone else or anyone else's needs just then. They wanted water, and they wanted it *now!*

If you were here last Sunday, you'll recognize the theme. We pick up with them today where we left off last week: out in the desert, in a dry and parched wilderness, with the Israelites complaining to Moses once again. This time it's not the lack of food that's primary on their minds: they have no water, they're thirsty, and once again they're sure Moses and the Lord he serves are trying to kill them. Why else would God have led them out to this barren wasteland?

Last week we read about how in similar circumstances the manna from heaven

came just in the nick of time. We heard how there was just enough to go around, how the people and their livestock were fed by this substance that came as a gift from heaven. But that was *last* week. And this is this *now*. Do you really expect the people to remember and to have faith that long? After all, they'd been through the Red Sea experience just prior to the miracle of the manna, and even so, they seemed to have no recollection of God's intercession on their behalf. It seems to have had no lasting effect on them, as though their brains weren't developed far enough yet to retain such information. Childlike, almost, they turn to Moses, their father figure, and whine for water.

We thought last week of how Moses must have felt, put in this position by his people. It's not a great spot to be in, to be the one looked to to fix the problem, when no solution is in sight. "*How many visionary individuals,*" writes Charles Cousar in his commentary on the Exodus passage, "*who undertake leadership roles in the church and in society find themselves incessantly buffeted by the unrealistic demands of those whom they seek to lead, and find themselves trapped between those demands and the realities of a given situation?*" Give them water in a barren, dry wasteland? How? From where are you going to produce it? Out of the rocks, for heaven's sake??

"*How much easier, how much less complicated it is to be a follower (and not a leader)*"¹ writes Cousar. At least then no one can point the finger at you when it doesn't happen.

Yes, Moses realizes he's in a bit of a jam. "*What shall I do with this people?*" he cries to God. "*They're about to stone me!*" I'd say he was accurately reading their body language. Decisive action would be the appropriate leadership response at this moment, for his own job security as well as for his physical survival.

Yes, these were some demanding, difficult folks to work with! Not unlike many of you here in the Sudbury church, who are impatient and demanding results from your PNC, charged with coming up with a new pastor for this congregation. They've been working nearly two years on the task, and you're growing thirsty for pastoral leadership in this wilderness. But where are they supposed to find the right match of talents, personality and commitment to lead you forward? Such leaders don't just grow on trees or pop out of rocks, at least not ones that I've seen. But never fear, the PNC will give you an update on their efforts when they report on their progress to you in worship on Sunday, October 22.

Getting back to the Israelites, who were almost childlike in their lack of attention span and their need for immediate gratification: God seems to have known this about them and been ready to deal with them. "*You want water? Fine... If it's water you want, it's water you'll get. Moses, go hit that rock over there with the magic stick I gave you. And take a couple of elders along to certify it as a verifiable miracle.*" Moses didn't ask any questions. He made haste and did as the Lord commanded, and sure enough... water!

End of story? Well, maybe, at one level. The desired water was produced, and the people and their children and livestock survived. Moses got to keep his job and his life.

But not the end of the story when you look at what *really* was involved. As we considered last week, for God to respond in the fashion we see here goes against what we would expect from an Old Testament kind of God. For the God of the Old Testament was not what we'd think of as a "warm and fuzzy" kind of guy. Fire and brimstone were often God's Old Testament response to human disobedience and ingratitude. But here, as with the manna, it's just the opposite. God withholds some very justifiable anger at these forgetful, ungrateful people, and like a parent of small children, responds to their immediately perceived need.

If they'd been more mature in their faith, they would have realized that in spite of the way the wilderness looked, with God all things are possible. They would have realized that if God had invested so heavily in freeing them from bondage in Egypt he wasn't about to leave them high and dry this far into the game. They would have had the patience to hang on just a little while longer, until an unforeseen factor entered the picture and changed the whole equation.

But at this point in their history, the Israelites didn't have this kind of sophistication of faith, and that was all right with God. Because God has a great deal of mercy, a great deal of understanding and forbearance, and frankly, a great deal of love for the Chosen People, no matter how poorly they may behave. For you see, it's not based on how well we do in matters of faith. It doesn't depend on us. If it did, we'd all be in trouble. But the fact is, it doesn't. It depends on God, and we just happen to be in luck, because God loves us.

In Jesus Christ, God "*emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness.*" Paul quotes these great words of an ancient Christian hymn in his letter to the Philippian church, emphasizing the central importance of God's gracious act of salvation. God didn't have to, but did so any way. God gave up divine power and became human, to demonstrate his love for human beings. "*And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.*" Here we see that the saving work is not done by those of us sinful human beings who finally get our act together and start behaving well. It's done by God, for us, in Jesus Christ. Our salvation is an act of God's great mercy, initiated by God on our behalf, motivated purely out of God's love for us.

All of us here today have much to learn and lots to change in the way we live and in how we relate to one another. And our entire world needs to learn a lesson on how to love one another and be forbearing of one another's ways of seeing and doing things. God knows this about all of us, and in spite of how far we have to go, God loves us completely, like a parent loves his or her child.

We're all included in God's grace and God's covenant with the Church, around

the world and throughout the ages. So let's join together at this world communion table and give thanks this morning, that God loves us, and that God's great mercy is shown toward us today and each and every day of our lives.

Amen.

1. Charles Cousar, in Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, c. 1995, p. 498