

Sermon 10032010 World Communion Sunday

Today, as many of you know, is World Communion Sunday. The first Sunday in October was designated World Communion Sunday back in 1933. In the darkest years of the Great Depression, the year that Adolf Hitler would come to power and fascist dictatorships were at their height all across the world, the Reverend Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh established a day to celebrate the unity of the human race in Jesus Christ, surpassing all political and ideological boundaries. What could be a better movement for unity than the coming together of all people everywhere who love the Prince of Peace? What could be a more powerful driving force for peace?

But what comes to mind for me, when I think of World Communion Sunday, is something vastly different. World Communion Sunday reminds me not of the loving peace I know in God, but of hatred and death. Right around eight years ago, October 6, 2002, it was World Communion Sunday. I was 16 years old, and I had just come out of church with my mother, following a lovely World Communion Sunday service, where we had celebrated God's peace and our unity in Christ with brothers and sisters the world over. We were sitting in the van, waiting for Dad to quit yammering with everybody, when a report came on the radio.

The report was detailing that day's air raids. As we watched our friends and loved ones stream out of the house of God, we heard the whistling of falling bombs, and stories of death, destruction, and misery. I don't think I really understood the full impact of it – I didn't understand the intricacies and the tragedies of politics or war – but I understood the sound I heard from the front seat, of my mother's quiet weeping. Just about a week later, Congress would pass the "Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of Armed Forces Against Iraq", which authorized "any means necessary" to combat the Iraqis, and the full force of the war was officially underway.

My mother, as far as I know, has never known anybody from Iraq. She is not particularly pro-Iraq, or rampantly anti-war. But when she heard those sounds on the radio, she knew that they could only translate into untold misery, grief beyond comprehension, for somebody. After hearing about the global unity that this special Sunday promises, we heard all about the destruction that we can bring upon one another when we are divided, she grieved. It didn't matter that they were strangers, that they were different, that she had also grieved greatly at the destruction of the World Trade Center the previous year – none of these things mattered as she lamented the destruction being wrought in Baghdad that day as though it were her own hometown.

Mourning is a difficult thing in our lives. We're not very good at it. Just visit a funeral. Hear the awkward small-talk, the giggles and the lighthearted stories of the deceased. Notice everybody giving a wide berth to the one or two faces in the crowd that are genuinely grieving – we don't even want to get near something so intense as mourning. Maybe it's that we're terrified of complaining, of whining, of seeming helpless, I don't know, but we spend so much of our lives trying desperately to avoid pain and sorrow that even when it's staring us in the face we'll refuse to accept it. I'm not saying that everybody needs to be bawling at every funeral or they're not sincere; what I'm saying is that we have a deep need to grieve. When we suffer, when we lose things or people, when our lives change – even when our compassion flares up at the suffering of

another; these things have an effect on our minds, on our souls, and we have a need to grieve. We need it! We will do serious damage to ourselves if we reject grieving.

We need to grieve as individual human beings. We are masters of repression, but sticking something like grief away in the back of our minds hurts us. It will change the way we look at the world, and at ourselves; it will change our relationships with our loved ones. It will trigger fears and suspicions and anger that will only fester and grow until we break down and grieve, lament our losses in some way. We have to experience the pain, not skip it – hear the pain in Jeremiah chapter 31, verse 15:

A voice is heard in Ramah,
mourning and great weeping,
Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,
because her children are no more."

We can't just soothe and comfort grief away – we have to experience it.

We need to grieve as nations and communities. That's why Lamentations was written – it's a national lament. In 586 BC, the Neo-Babylonians sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and took a huge portion of the Israelites – especially all the leaders, the priests, the royalty, all of whom were necessary for Israel to worship God and to function as a nation – and shipped those people off to captivity in Babylon. Those left behind were left in a devastated city, once vibrant and holy, now desecrated and forsaken. Hear the pain in verses 4 and 5:

The roads to Zion mourn, for no one comes to her appointed feasts.
All her gateways are desolate,
her priests groan,
her maidens grieve,
and she is in bitter anguish.

⁵ Her foes have become her masters;
her enemies are at ease.
The LORD has brought her grief
because of her many sins.
Her children have gone into exile,
captive before the foe.

This is more than personal pain; it is the collective pain of millions. It's devastating to the community's consciousness – it destroys not just life and property but national identity. When millions of neighbors share a tragedy, they need time to figure out who they are, what it now means to be a Judean, an Iraqi, a New Yorker, a Haitian. That's why the book of Lamentations is so important in the Hebrew Scriptures; it has for centuries been recited on the ninth day of the Jewish month of Av, a yearly commemoration of the pain and anguish suffered by the Israelites in the various times that Jerusalem was destroyed or taken captive. You need that kind of commemoration – a tragedy this great needs to become part of who you are or it will tear you apart.

But then, we know something about commemoration; we celebrate a tragedy every week. There is a man whom we all love more than ourselves, and he was tortured, mocked, and murdered, and every week we reenact his last meal as a free man. We have to remember! We have to keep the pain of Christ's betrayal and Crucifixion in our hearts because that's the only way to experience the true miracle of the cross. Before we can thank God for raising Jesus from the dead, we must first be driven to the ground, asking God why he had to die. It doesn't make sense. That death, a tragedy of that magnitude, makes us question what we thought we knew about God.

You see, we need to grieve not just as individuals, not just as nations, but as children of God. To the Israelites, the thought that God would allow the destruction of the Promised Land and the dislocation of the Chosen People was unfathomable. It undermined the very foundations of their faith. The Israelites could not help but question where God was when this happened. Of course, the prophets said that it was for Israel's sins, but even the prophets acknowledged that in the moment of suffering, fault and blame are irrelevant. God is present when we suffer, when we lament, regardless of what we have done. It may or may not have been the case that Jerusalem was in some way responsible for its destruction, just as it could be argued that the bombs in Iraq that we heard on that World Communion Sunday fell upon those who deserved them – but it doesn't matter. Even the guilty can lament and be heard by God.

So why is all this in a World Communion Sunday sermon? Isn't that day about peace and unity, about Christians worldwide coming together in love? I guess that the Lamentations text reminds us of how far we have to go. Thousands of years since this text was written, we are still plagued by the same divisions and violence that it describes. World Communion Sunday means recognizing those fractures in our world, and recognizing how our sisters and brothers in Christ grieve because of those fractures.

But on World Communion Sunday, we are also reminded of the hope we experience. When we celebrate World Communion Sunday, we celebrate the unifying power of Christ, that power of God's truth to draw people in. We celebrate how that power, which unites all believers across the globe, is stronger than our greatest pain – in 2 Timothy, Paul tells us that Jesus has destroyed death, and when we mourn, our mourning will turn to joy in Christ.

When we celebrate World Communion Sunday, we celebrate that millions of people around the world who have embraced the love of their fellow human being as a way of life. Millions of people who want to rebuild the world around justice, mercy, and peace. Millions of people who rejoice together, grieve together, and serve together.

When we celebrate World Communion Sunday, we celebrate not only the unity that we have in Christ now, but also the unity that humankind will experience when Christ returns.

This is a day to see what unites us and to repair the divisions between us. A day to feel a connection to sisters and brothers all across the planet who, just like you, have come to know God through Jesus Christ. A day to commit ourselves to building a world free of the hatred that brings about our destruction, a world shaped in the image of the Dominion of God. Amen.