

NO OTHER GODS
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October 5, 2014
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
World Communion Sunday
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Exodus 20:1-20

Then God spoke all these words: *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.*

Behind the word “LORD” are the unpronounceable Hebrew consonants YHWH, meaning “to be” or “I am who or what I am” or “I will be.” But if you do say YHWH it’s the sound of breath.

Whatever else “no other gods before me” might mean, it is an early insight from the Great Ancestors that only one thing in this world really matters, and in the end, as we find out later, it is *no thing at all*. It’s nothing but love.

It would take a while for that insight to blossom. After all, evolution takes time, including the evolution of human consciousness and understanding. But eventually we would see clearly that God is love, and since we are made in the image of God, we are love as well. There is no other image for divinity. Love is it—and more like a verb than a noun.

And that brings us to the gospel lesson for today.

Matthew 21:33-46

The stone, that the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.

That line is taken from a rather long parable full of violence, including the murder of a landowner’s son. There are many ways to interpret that sentence within that parable. I see it this way: Many people turn their back on love thinking love is weak, naïve or ineffective. But love, as it turns out, is the cornerstone for life, including your own.

The stone, that the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone. The cornerstone of life is love.

Which brings us to this special day on the church calendar.

Today is world communion Sunday. At one time it expressed a hope that all Christians in the world would celebrate communion all on the same day as an expression of unity. It didn’t happen. Many did. But not nearly all. Maybe someday. But not yet.

The idea was hatched in 1933 at the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, more specifically in the stewardship committee of that church. 1933 was a dark and gloomy time for the world—worldwide economic depression, Nazism and fascism were on the rise; fear and anxiety ruled the hearts of many. Sound familiar?

In 1933, at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in a certain committee meeting someone asked: *What can we do to bear the light of hope? How can we experience and express our connections with peoples around the world?* And just like that an idea arose. Let’s invite Christians everywhere to acknowledge our unity in Christ around One Table, One Bread, One Cup, One Gospel.

In retrospect, it might sound parochial and small. But at that time, it was bold. It was daring. It was a dream of a new possibility.

The dream was larger than one church or one city could contain. It grew and evolved. The National Council of Christian Churches adopted the idea in 1940, and after WWII it was widely embraced and practiced by tens of thousands of churches of all kinds. At the time it was intended for the Christian world, not the Jewish world or Muslim world or Hindu world or any other world. Just Christians.

Maybe it was a big dream in that time. But for us today, it is not big enough—not nearly big enough. We live in a different time and a different world. And that just shows how good ideas evolve.

If only there were one world, world communion might be easy. But there are many worlds on this one planet. The western world. The Muslim world. The free world and not so free world. The third world, developing world, and a world of destitution. Not to mention the world that belongs to the 1%, and that invisible world of the .1%. Do they want to commune with the rest of us? If so, it's hard to tell.

So what world are we talking about on "World Communion Sunday?"

I'm guessing for us it's the whole world and all the smaller worlds therein. And that's our prayer and that's our song for this morning. Peace for all nations everywhere—not just ours, or a few. All. If only the broken world could be whole, what a wonderful world that would be.

The unity of only Christians, or Muslims, or Jews, or Hindus, or Taoist or *whateverists*, is not enough any longer. The dream of unity must be for all nations regardless of religions or none.

Unity is not uniformity. We don't long for uniformity. We long for community—communities, large and small, that respect diversity and complexity. Actually, that's the way of the universe works.

Ever since the Big Bang, molecules have had the urge to merge, to form more and more complexity, and wider and deeper community. We can see it on the planet right under our nose. Without biological diversity of incredible variety, there would be no life. Monoculture spells death. If we were all the same we'd all be dead. Life thrives on diversity and community. There's no other way.

World communion now means bringing the world together under the banner of love, for God is love and those who abide in love abide in God. Now, there is more than one way to say that and we should learn how to do so. For the very name of God has become an oppressive idol for many and a symbol of hatred to others. Be careful less you use the name of God in vain.

Longing for world communion means working to understand that other people are just like us underneath the differences. All people, including those we consider enemies, deserve the benefit of the doubt and a lot of respect.

By the way, to love our enemies doesn't mean allowing our enemy to hurt or kill us, or our children, or those we love. Hopefully, we don't ever get to that point if we love them *first* by making an effort to understand who they are, and what sufferings they bear.

If we make such an effort, if we listen carefully and deeply, we just might find out that they don't hate us just to hate. Most often they hate us for the same reason you hate someone and want to hurt back because of injuries or insults inflicted on you that you just can't get over. But we won't understand our enemies or learn from them unless we have open minds and hearts.

If we are humble and if we listen, we might discover others are not nearly as wicked as we think and we are not nearly as righteous as we pretend. And attitudes and practices like that can lead to true communion and community with others.

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This Is My Song

This is my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
But other hearts in other lands are beating
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine;
But other lands have sunlight, too, and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
So hear my song, O God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.

Lloyd Stone, 1934
Tune: Finlandia