

October 4, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

The Joyful Feast of the People of God by The Reverend Nancy S. Hodgkins

John 15:4-5, 10-12

Today is World Communion Sunday: a day when Christians around the world gather in worship to share in the elements of bread and wine in remembrance and celebration of the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This is also the time when we bear witness to the unity of Christians everywhere as we seek to live out Christ's command to work for justice and peace in a world that is deeply divided in conflict and war. As we gather to worship this day, we do it alongside Christian communities and organizations worldwide.

World Communion Sunday (originally called World Wide Communion Sunday) originated in the Presbyterian Church in 1936, and ever since then congregations have gathered on the first Sunday in October in the United States, and throughout the world, to celebrate the Lord's Supper. From the very beginning our denomination planned so that Christians from every tradition could join us in a truly worldwide celebration.

This summer during the Session Workday we were asked to introduce ourselves to our guest leader. Along with our names, we were asked to share the farthest place from Westminster that we had celebrated the Lord's Supper. I thought this was a great question! It gave each of us a chance to remember a specific place and time in which we broke bread with others. As I listened to the stories

of those in the circle and as I reflected on past congregations where I have worshiped and worked, I was overwhelmed with thanksgiving for all those individuals and communities who have walked alongside each of us during our journeys of faith...so many God-filled moments.

What a privilege it is to partake in this holy sacrament surrounded by other believers in places like a rocky beach on the coast of Maine, a mountain top in the Middle East, a stone auditorium in the mountains of North Carolina, a house church in Peru and a conference center in Colombia. Whenever the people of God gather to worship, we can trust that God is present and working in the lives of communities and individuals in many and various ways.

On this very Sunday last year I had the privilege of preaching and co-celebrating communion at our sister church, Primera Iglesia, in Barranquilla, Colombia. It was our first trip with the sole purpose of spending time with our Sister Church.

The people of the North Coast of Colombia have had many struggles, but they are people who are full of life, joy, and deep abiding faith. They are people who dance. They dance at every opportunity whether it is a casual get-together, a birthday celebration or a major holiday, there is always dancing.

Worship in Colombia, like its people, is always a joyful occasion and even though this was not the first time I had worshiped in Colombia, there was something different about this particular experience. It might have been that the communion ware was a gift from Westminster, made with love by one of our own members. It might have been that we were surrounded by people who exuded hospitality and love in every smile, hug and word that they spoke; but I think what made that particular service so special was knowing, truly knowing, that on that World Communion Sunday we were gathering around the table with brothers and sisters at the exact same time as our Westminster congregation, and that somehow in the midst of this sacred act of sharing bread and wine that God was present with us at Primera Iglesia, in the same way that God was present here at Westminster and with other congregations around the world.

Our communion liturgy reminds us each time we gather at the table that "This is the Joyful Feast of the People of God," and that "People will come from east and west and from north and south and sit at table in the kingdom of God." We hear these words every time we celebrate the sacrament, and yet last year these words were so significant and so very true. It was indeed a joyful feast!

Rowan Williams, the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury writes in his book, *Tokens of Trust*, "When we receive the bread and wine at Communion, we are nearest the very heart of what it is to be a Christian and to be the Church.... It is a moment when we declare who we are and when we are given the greatest opportunity to grow as believers, because we are as open as we can be to the act of God in Jesus and the Spirit."

"When Christians meet for worship, they don't just share bread and wine; they gather to be told who they are, not only in action but in word, in story and song, and above all in the story and song that is the Bible."

In the Directory of Worship found in the Book of Order, Part Two of our Presbyterian Church Constitution we find these words...

“In this meal the Church celebrates the joyful feast of the people of God, and anticipates the great banquet and marriage supper of the Lamb. Brought by the Holy Spirit into Christ’s presence, the Church eagerly expects and prays for the day when Christ shall come in glory and God will be all in all. Nourished by this hope, the Church rises from the Table and is sent by the power of the Holy Spirit to participate in God’s mission to the world, to proclaim the gospel, to exercise compassion, to work for justice and peace until Christ’s Kingdom shall come at last.”

My friends, the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is to be joyful. This is not a funeral meal or the observance of a last supper; this is a joyful celebration. Unlike the disciples who sit listening to Jesus in chapter 15 of the Gospel of John, we know how this story ends...we know what Jesus means when he says, “If you abide in me and my words, if you keep my commandments, if you love God and one another there will be joy.”

This joy, our joy, comes in knowing the rest of the story. We know that death was not the last word for Jesus. As Christians we believe that God resurrected Jesus and that Jesus is still present with us in the work and movement of the Holy Spirit. We celebrate this special meal together as Jesus commanded: eating, drinking, and remembering.

We come to the Lord’s Table this day having confessed our sins, having heard the words of forgiveness and assurance. We come hopeful, eager and joyful; we come with our doubts and our beliefs, our struggles and our successes; we come aware of the needs of our neighbors and renewed to work for God’s peace with justice in all situations. We come believing in a Lord and Savior who is not dead, but alive and present with us. We come and sit around God’s table and on this World Communion Sunday we look forward to a taste of what it might be like to sit at table in the Kingdom of heaven with our brothers and sisters from every corner of the world, as we all partake in the Joyful Feast of the People of God. Amen