

**One in Christ Jesus**  
Galatians 3:23-29

*World Communion Sunday/ Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost/ 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2021*

As a child and well into adulthood, I assumed that World Communion Sunday really meant the *world*, that on this day Christians everywhere celebrate the Lord's Supper. It used to be known as Worldwide Communion Sunday, which probably formed this impression in me. I loved the vision of billions of Christians around the globe all celebrating Communion on this same day.

This vision was shattered thirty-one years ago this weekend. It was my first Sunday as assistant minister at St. Leonard's Parish Church in St. Andrews, Scotland. I was ordained the previous week in New Jersey and started at St. Leonard's the following week. It was Harvest Sunday, a kind of thanksgiving celebration. The Table was beautifully decorated with the fruits of the harvest, but the Communion elements were nowhere to be found. I asked Lawson Brown, the minister, "Isn't this World Communion Sunday?" He said, "What's that? Never heard of it." And that's when I discovered that [World Communion Sunday](#) is an American thing.<sup>1</sup> So, no, all the Christians of the world are not sharing Communion today. Many are, but not everyone.

Nevertheless, isn't this a great image, World Communion Sunday? Think of it: diverse people and cultures united in their worship of Christ, demonstrating to the world that it's possible to share a meal together, to eat and pray and work and worship and serve together. United by the Holy Spirit, we share in the real presence of our Living Lord when we share the meal. *Koinonia*. Real community. Radical hospitality and welcome. Connected to the global Church. A celebration of the beautiful diversity of the body of Christ. This is the Lord's Table and he is our gracious host. At this Table, God's Word is enacted, God's Word is embodied, real and tangible in bread and wine, for the entire world to see.

But it's not the meal that pulls us together. It's not an ideal or vision of the beloved community that pulls us together. As Paul makes clear in Galatians and elsewhere, it is Christ Jesus who stands at the center of the community. It is the reality of the Risen Christ, the new life given in and through the Risen Christ, who creates a new reality in us, who forms something new in us, who unites us together into something unique and weird and wonderful and wounded, both beautiful and bizarre, a marvelously disparate group of people transformed into a new people, forged together into an *ekklesia*, a church. When Christ is at the center of the church, there is space for everyone, there's room for an entire world.

And the Spirit is continually drawing all kinds of people into the church. People who think and believe and look and smell like us—and plenty who don't! Because the Spirit is drawing people toward Christ, the church of Christ will always have a wide and wild diversity. It's supposed to be this way. This means we should always be suspicious of voices and forces in the church that try to limit diversity. The Church is always healthier, stronger, and more effective in its work when it's diverse. If you have investments in the market and work with a financial planner, you know that portfolios are healthiest when they're diverse. We need biodiversity for us to survive on this planet.<sup>2</sup> The same is true for the Church. Our love for

Christ, Christ's love at work within us allows us to celebrate and value difference, because God's love yields diversity. When we worship Christ, when we know his love for us, we're free to really see and then love and then welcome everyone else, the stranger becomes friend—without fear.

That's why Paul can make the radical, shocking, earth-shattering claim that to be in Christ means we have clothed ourselves with Christ. When we are clothed in Christ—this is baptism language, taking on a new identity, a new way, a new life—all the other labels, identities, groups, personas, tribes, categories that we used to belong to, or define ourselves by, or others, are now washed away. They no longer carry weight, meaning, or status. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). In Colossians, it's even more radical, shocking, and earth-shattering. Clothed with a new self, being renewed according to the image of God at work in us, "...there is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all" (Col. 3:11). Even the lowly, godless barbarians are welcome—a barbarian is anyone you consider beneath you, below you, other, different, a foreigner, someone who speaks a language you can't understand, because they're not speaking Greek, not speaking your language!

As Paul came to know, every category, label, every wall of division is obliterated and every distinction based on perspectives of superiority-inferiority, of exclusion-inclusion that defined the Greco-Roman-Jewish world have no place in the church of Jesus Christ. Everyone is free to be part of this community. I stand amazed by how radical and subversive this was for Paul's time—and still is in ours. From his experience in Christ, he imagines a new world, a new people, a new kind of community. This is more than just a good idea or an evangelism gimmick to get people to join. It was the reality Paul was compelled to live *from* because though he persecuted Christ's followers, Christ encountered him and threw him into a new reality of grace and freedom. No longer alienated from Christ, Paul was welcomed into a new world.

All of this is good to remember on World Communion Sunday, living in a nation, a world that continues to struggle with division of all kinds, especially around questions of race and ethnic differences, where the church still struggles to live into what it was created to be and is called to be. We still struggle to live into our baptismal identity. When we remember who we are already in Christ, and live into this reality, many of our divisions and the things that separate us from one another will fall away. Theologian William Placher wrote, "If the church of the baptized should be a community of a new kind of liberty, so the church that gathers around the Lord's Table ought to form a community of a new kind of equality."<sup>3</sup>

In her short story "The Welcome Table," Alice Walker tells of an elderly African American woman, tired and thirsty, entering the vestibule of a white church. Some of them there at the church saw the age, the dotage, the missing buttons down the front of her mildewed black dress. Others looked at her and saw cooks, chauffeurs, maids.... "Many of them saw jungle orgies in an evil place, where others were reminded of riotous anarchists looting and raping in the street." And so the hierarchy of the church mobilized in defense of the racism of the congregation. Leading the way was the pastor. "The reverend of the church stopped her pleasantly as she stepped into the vestibule.... 'Auntie, you know this is not your church?' As if

one could choose the wrong one.” [Later,] out on the hot highway, dying as her heart gives out, she sees Jesus walking down the road and tells him, “how they had tossed her out of his church.”<sup>4</sup> As we know, *that* kind of church is not his church. I’m not sure what to call it but it’s not a church.

In Christ’s church, people will come from east and west and north and south—from everywhere, every direction, every *every*—to sit at Table in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:29). When we gather at this Table—and every time we gather—the entire world is with us too. We are one in Christ Jesus, every other category, label, association, tribe, affiliation, group, party, identity that we belong too, is washed away, and we (re)discover who we are in Christ, “a still more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31).



*The Best Supper by Jan Richardson*

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<sup>1</sup> World Communion Sunday had its origins at the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh in 1933, later adopted by the entire denomination in 1936, and then in 1940 endorsed by the [National Council of Churches](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Listen](#) to Michel Martin, a journalist with NPR, on the generative power of diversity and faith. Martin talks with Krista Tippett at the Chautauqua Intuition. See also Katherine W. Phillips’ article, “[How Diversity Makes Us Stronger](#)” in *Scientific American*.

<sup>3</sup> William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 151.

<sup>4</sup> Alice Walker, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, summarized in Placher, 154.