

“With These Hands”

John 13: 1-17, 31b-35, I Corinthians 11: 23-26

World Communion Sunday/B, October 7, 2012

Lynne M. Dolan

In the spirit of true confessions I admit to you, I love my job. I love worship. One of things I love most about worship is any opportunity to celebrate communion. At the beginning of the year, the 9th grade Wednesday school class learns about symbols. One of the experiences that will permeate their time together is the sharing of sacred meals. We call the meal we share with our brothers and sisters in Christ communion. At Silver Lake, Wednesday is the night the whole camp shares communion. In addition, on Friday morning, we finish the week celebrating communion in the waterfall chapel that sits among the majestic pine trees just above the high ropes course. We take the bread and dip it in the cup amid the laughter and encouragement of fellow campers striving to master the flying squirrel.

Maundy Thursday is one of my very favorite worship services. It is filled with such rich spiritual experiences. This morning’s gospel lesson is the cornerstone of the first portion of that service. Unfortunately the foot washing story appears rarely in the lectionary. I rarely go “off the grid” when it comes to the lectionary, but I decided to do so today.

As Jesus gathers in that Upper Room with his disciples for perhaps the last time, there is a sense of urgency. He still has much to teach them. He ritualizes the servant leadership model by suggesting that he wash the disciples’ feet. Predictably, they object. It feels completely wrong. They are supposed to wash his feet. After all, he is the master and they the servants. But Jesus turns this notion upside down. There is no longer master and servant. We are all one. We are to serve equally. He later instructs them to model this same servant leadership for others. The lesson ends with Jesus teaching them the great commandment, to love one another as he has loved them. They move from washing each other’s feet to sharing a sacred meal then into the world to offer their lives as a sacrament to others.

This morning, the first Sunday in October, is World Communion Sunday. This observance was begun by the Presbyterian Church in 1936 and has gradually spread to include a broad range of Christian communities both in the United States and around the world. The National Council of Churches, USA, notes that a celebration like this—a celebration of our oneness in Christ, has great relevance in our world today. We live in a world where so many people are separated from each other by injustice, violence, and fear. It is therefore still relevant to celebrate that which brings us together, rather than the things that tear us apart.

Today, Christians celebrate our oneness in Christ. This unity may seem obvious, however so often we act as if this were not so. We do not always love our neighbor, not even our Christian neighbor with whom we share this spiritual bond. It may seem obvious to love our brothers and sisters in Christ no matter where they live, what

language they speak, what bread they serve at their communion table or what particular words they use to bless the meal. It may *seem* obvious, but when we look around at the way Christians behave, we are moved to confess that our relationships are often strained or completely broken.

Along the bottom of the logo for the United Church of Christ you find the words, “that they may all be one.” Today we recognize and celebrate our oneness. As we celebrate this unity we recommit ourselves to a discipleship marked by a radical hospitality. Last month, more than 50 leaders attended the Ecumenical Judicatory Leaders Summit in Cleveland, OH. The gathering brought together leaders from the UCC, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian and United Methodist communities. They came together to address welcoming people of all sexual orientations and gender identities into our churches.

Michael Schuenemeyer, the UCC executive for health and wholeness advocacy commented that a gathering of this type wouldn’t have been possible a few years ago. Aside from the UCC, the Episcopal Church is the only denomination to bless same-sex marriages. “The values of God’s extravagant and radical inclusion for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people continue to advance, even in places where it remains difficult,” says Schuenemeyer. This group of leaders came together to discern how our churches can continue to bring healing to those who have been wounded by the actions of the church and create communities of welcome where all people will find, among other things, a place at the table.

We can not celebrate World Communion Sunday with clear consciences and joyful hearts as long as some of our brothers and sisters are excluded from this table. What Jesus embodies and teaches us is a radical hospitality that does not exclude people for any reason. Jesus, the one who came to embody God’s extravagant love and acceptance humbles himself before those whom he had come to love and adore. He lovingly engages in an act of radical hospitality to demonstrate that we are all one; one in the spirit, one in our devotion for each other and God, and one in our commitment to share that love with all people. He instructs us to go and do to others what he has done to and with us, not just a select few, not only those with whom you have an intimate relationship and not those from whom you might gain special favors or support. Go, and offer the same extraordinary care to all people.

A preacher tells the story of growing up in a family where folks were often invited to stay and share their evening meal. Some times the invitation was made in advance so plenty of food would be prepared. At other times, guests were invited to stay on the spur of the moment. The family had a secret code they would share with each other prior to the meal. If momma said, FHB, that meant “Family Hold Back.” Momma wanted the children to hold back taking large portions until their guests had enough to eat. If she said POTT that meant there was Plenty On The Table and everyone could indulge. Her mother used these codes because she never wanted to be stingy with her guests. She always wanted to extend an extravagant welcome to those who had come, whether the invitation were extended ahead of time or a response to the movement of the spirit.

There should never be any holding back in the body of Christ. There is and always shall be POTT, Plenty on the Table. This is not our table, it is the Lord's table. Jesus is the host and we are his gracious guests. We welcome everyone, we share all that we have, there is plenty on the table. Occasionally we have those moments when we worry whether or not we will have enough. Will there be enough chicken for all the guests at the South Park Inn meal? Will there be enough for all the kids that show up for Wednesday school this week? Will there be enough bread and juice to feed the hundreds of friends and family that have come to share in another amazing confirmation celebration? No matter how much we worry, there is always enough. God always provides enough love, enough grace, enough wisdom, enough to move us beyond our fears to share whatever we have.

It saddens me to know there are people who do not feel welcome at this table. It angers me that people have been wounded by members of the body of Christ and have not yet encountered churches and Christians that will not turn them away. Today we celebrate our oneness in Christ knowing as we proclaim an extravagant welcome and then strive to embody it, there is still more healing to be done. The writer and graphic artist, Jan L. Richardson offers a blessing for World Communion Sunday. May her words remind us that healing and hope for the future flow from this place of deep gratitude and welcome. There is a power we can neither name nor fully comprehend in this bread and cup that we share. I share this blessing with you trusting in the Spirit to make it so.

And the Table will be Wide
A Blessing for World Communion Sunday

And the table
 will be wide.
 And the welcome
 will be wide.
 And the arms
 will open wide
 to gather us in.
 And our hearts
 will open wide
 to receive.

And we will come
 as children who trust
 there is enough.
 And we will come
 unhindered and free.
 And our aching
 will be met
 with bread.
 And our sorrow
 will be met
 with wine.

And we will open our hands
to the feast
without shame.
And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.
And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.
And we will taste
and know
of delight.

And we will become bread
for a hungry world.
And we will become drink
for those who thirst.
And the blessed
will become the blessing.
And everywhere
will be the feast.

Amen

Table Blessing

To your table
you bid us come.
You have set the places,
you have poured the wine,
and there is always room,
you say,
for one more.

And so we come.
From the streets
and from the alleys
we come.

From the deserts
and from the hills
we come.

From the ravages of poverty
and from the palaces of privilege
we come.

Running,
limping,
carried,
we come.

We are bloodied with our wars,
we are wearied with our wounds,
we carry our dead within us,
and we reckon with their ghosts.

We hold the seeds of healing,
we dream of a new creation,
we know the things
that make for peace,
and we struggle to give them wings.

And yet, to your table
we come.
Hungering for your bread,
we come;
thirsting for your wine,
we come;
singing your song
in every language,
speaking your name
in every tongue,
in conflict and in communion,
in discord and in desire,
we come,
O God of Wisdom,
we come

Prayer © Jan L. Richardson from [In Wisdom's Path: Discovering the Sacred in Every Season](#).