

“Love Your Neighbor—Near and Far”
October 6, 2024

Isaiah 46:1-4
Romans 13:7-14

Liberal Protestants proposed World Communion Sunday in the 1930's and encouraged its wider observance beginning in the 1940's—during a time of economic inequality and uncertainty, during a time when the whole world sensed a gathering cloud of tension between nations and peoples. This is to say, World Communion Sunday developed in a time much like our own and continues to inform our faith in these days. On this day, we are invited to see what we share with other Christians, with other people of faith, and really, with all people.

As we worship this morning, we are a little more aware that we are united with other Christians beyond national boundaries. We acknowledge our common faith and our common humanity. We acknowledge our common share in the suffering of the world.

We speak theologically and say that this is a fallen world—that we are alienated from God, from one another, even from the best in ourselves. In this fallen world there is war and terror and greed and human evil.

We don't like to hear that in America. In America we like to hear that we are exceptional—beyond evil, exempt from suffering, and incapable of inflicting suffering on others. We like to hear that we are capable—on our own—of overcoming anything that might come our way. And if things are not going well, we like to hear that we can make America great again.

We don't like to hear about suffering. And I don't like to be the one to talk about it on a beautiful October morning. But there it is, all around us.

When we look beyond our own suffering to the hurting world in which we live, we begin to see our deeper connections with other people. And we begin to see a new way forward.

The God we worship is no stranger to pain and sorrow and suffering. We remember that our actions toward the least of our neighbors are our actions toward God.

And we have heard once again the central place that love has in all of this.

Perhaps the scripture lessons today and on recent Sunday mornings are beginning to seem a little repetitive.

We listened as Leviticus told us: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

We listened as Jesus told us *twice*: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

And this morning, just in case there was any doubt or confusion in our minds, we listened as Paul told us: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” concluding: “Love does no wrong to neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”—literally, “Love is the fullness of Torah.”

The great ancient rabbi, Hillel once said: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary, now go and learn!”

The witness of the entire Bible, the essence of the Jewish and Christian traditions, is this: Love your neighbor. We cannot say this often enough: Love your neighbor.

In these days, such love is tested in many ways.

The global refugee crisis continues. At least 117 million people around the world have been forced to flee their homes. Among them are nearly 43.4 million refugees, around 40 per cent of whom are under the age of 18. Violent political actions all over the world have created waves of refugees and displaced people, unable to return home for fear of their lives.

Refugees fleeing horrendous situations—life threatening situations—choose not to be overcome by evil. They come to the United States in the hope of overcoming evil through the welcome and embrace of what remains of the goodness of this nation.

I don't need to convince you that one way we live out our faith is by offering this welcoming goodness. Over the years our congregation has supported refugees from Vietnam and the Republic of Congo. Such a welcome is becoming more crucial even as it becomes more dangerous. You have heard the attacks in recent months: Powerful voices continue to speak loudly against refugees and immigrants.

Tyler Anbinder, a historian at George Washington University, tells us: “Over the centuries, nativists [in the United States] have leveled 10 main charges against immigrants: They bring crime; they import poverty; they spread disease; they don't assimilate; they corrupt our politics; they steal our jobs; they cause our taxes to increase; they're a security risk; their religion is incompatible with American values; they can never be ‘true Americans.’”

And here's his point: Long before the lies about dogs being eaten, the Republican candidate for President had “made every one of these charges. He has attacked and scapegoated immigrants in ways that [other] presidents never have — and in the process, he has spread more fear, resentment, and hatred of immigrants than any American in history.”ⁱ

Such hatred and suspicion and lies are not going away anytime soon. And the refugee crisis will continue to grow.

But we listen and hear another word that comes to us this morning—an older, life-giving word: “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

We seek the peace of our city, the peace of our nation, the peace of the world. We work toward for the day when the hungry are fed and the homeless are sheltered. We welcome those whose lives are uprooted by forces they cannot control. We bring relief to those in the middle of disasters. We seek to fulfill the law.

We do not do these things as saviors. With humility, we recognize that are called to be, not so much a *solution* to the hurts of the world as a *sign* to a hurting world—individuals and a community that point toward what God is still doing.

We love our neighbors. And today we are a little more mindful that our neighbors are our companions—a word that means those with whom we eat bread.

The weight of life is just too great to carry it by ourselves. We need one another. We live the life of faith together. By God's grace congregations are places in which we fulfill the law of Christ by loving one another as we have been loved.

These times call us back to the basics of our liberal faith. This table—where bread is broken and the cup is shared as we remember God's love shown in Jesus—this table is the strong root of our faith and our life together. If we are going to love our neighbors, we will do so only as we are nourished by the food and drink offered here.

Of course, there is more involved than just this congregation in this place.

The word "ecumenical" finds its root in the Greek word for household—*oikos*. From its start in the twentieth century, the ecumenical movement has been a movement seeking to establish bonds of compassion and mutual concern across and beyond national borders. It cares for the worldwide household of faith, recognizing that our neighbors are both near and far.

So it is that in the Congregational tradition we find ourselves involved with the poor, the hungry, the outcast—with those throughout the world who are often pushed to the edges. By faith we recognize that we're all in this together.

We don't live in isolation. Our Congregational tradition emphasizes the importance of the life of faith lived together. How else but together as Christ's church can we expect to make any difference in the world? This is how it happens in the church: one group sends money, another drives trucks filled with donations, another group arrives to serve meals, another group shows up to rebuild a house. In our Congregational independence we often overlook that we are connected—we are a *part* of a much larger *whole*—the body of Christ. It depends on us—but it doesn't *all* depend on us *alone*. We are in this together.

The Congregational Church.

Christians around the world.

The people of every nation.

Everything that lives and moves upon this earth.

We're all in this together,

bearing one another's burdens in Christ

even as the living God bears up each of us and all of us

sustaining us with food and drink at the table

in this place and around the world.

We who are many are one body. When we come again at the Lord's Table, we come, as we do each time, as members of the one universal church. But perhaps today we come more consciously

aware that we are not alone on our journey. We walk together with men and women, boys and girls who live in unknown places, in unfamiliar—often inhospitable—situations.

We come to the table together—and what do we find?

We find in this place a table that in a small and particular way holds all of the gifts of God.

We find in this place a meal that in a small and particular way ends our separation from God and one another.

We find in this place food and drink that in a small and particular way offer the nourishment and joy needed that we might once again love our neighbors as ourselves.

This food and drink and meal and table tell a particular story of the way in which God is bringing about a new creation through death and resurrection. And when we tell this story in this way, we are brought back into relationship with all people who gather to eat at all tables and with all living things that are fed by the care of God.

This meal prepares us for the work that is still ours to do in these days of unraveling—weaving a new fabric of peace so that we might be a part of the realm of heaven that God is creating among all people.

World Communion Sunday, then, turns out to be far more important than we might ever have realized.

This table is where we begin the work of loving our neighbors, near and far. This table is where we return again and again to be nurtured in that work, work that we do only in the strength that God gives.

ⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/trump-has-spread-more-hatred-of-immigrants-than-any-american-in-history/2019/11/07/7e253236-ff54-11e9-8bab-0fc209e065a8_story.html