

A Feast for All Believers
World Communion Sunday
Isaiah 25:6-10a, Revelation 7:9-17
October 4, 2015

Today is *World Communion Sunday*, celebrated annually on the first Sunday of October by many Christian churches throughout our nation and the world with the intent of promoting Christian unity and ecumenical cooperation. *World Communion Sunday* dates all the way back to the 1930's. In 1940, the Federal Council of Churches, now the National Council of Churches, endorsed *World Communion Sunday* and began to promote it to Christian churches worldwide.

Today the National Council of Churches has thirty seven member denominations which include Mainline Protestants, Orthodox, African American denominations, Evangelical, and the three main historic peace churches; Church of the Brethren, Society of Friends (otherwise known as the Quakers) and Mennonites. While not full members, more than 50 other Christian faith groups relate to the National Council of Churches in one way or another. They include the Southern Baptists, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics. All National Council of Churches members subscribe to its Statement of Faith and its preamble which states: "The National Council of Churches is a community of Christian communions, which, in response to the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures, confess Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, as Savior and Lord. These communions covenant with one another to manifest ever more fully the unity of the Church. Relying upon the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, the communions come together as the Council in common mission, serving in all creation to the glory of God."

Why are groups like the National Council of Churches and days like *World Communion Sunday* important? Well, it's estimated that there are somewhere between 30,000 – 40,000 different Christian denominations throughout the world. Though when one does some research that number is very deceiving because about 75% of those 30-40,000 are said to be in Africa, where just about every church is an independent church, thus each is counted as one denomination. Yet many of them would have the same basic Christian beliefs. But, even if we take that number down to the thousands, or even into the hundreds representing the larger Christian denominations throughout the world, it becomes rather difficult to say that "the Christian church throughout the world is united as one body in Christ."

Did Jesus envision all these different denominations when he established his church 2,000 years ago? I think not. In fact I'm not sure that Jesus envisioned denominations at all. I think there is a better chance than not that he envisioned churches to be something what we find in Africa, small, local churches, where a limited number of people are united as one body in Christ. The larger a body becomes, the more diversity there is, and the more difficult it becomes to stay united. Hence the struggle we are experiencing in Mennonite Church USA today.

Throughout the 2,000 year history of the Christian church it has proved very difficult to maintain unity amidst diversity. Most often churches have been too quick to form or become a part of a denomination and even quicker to break away. The history of the Mennonite church is no exception. The history of the Mennonite church is a history of schisms, splits, breaks and divisions.

Our current *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* has one of its twenty-four articles devoted to “Church Order and Unity.” Article 16 states:

“We believe that the church of Jesus Christ is one body with many members, ordered in such a way, through the one Spirit, believers may be built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

As God’s people, the church is a holy temple, a spiritual house, founded upon the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. Church order is needed to maintain unity on important matters of faith and life so that each may serve and be served, and the body of Christ may be built up in love. Love and unity in the church are a witness to the world of God’s love.”

That is a pretty high calling!

The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus, which is believed by many to be a letter to all Christians and all churches:

I (Paul) therefore, as a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3 (ESV)

An even higher calling!

Sad to say but most Christians are not known for their humility, their gentleness, their bearing with one another in love, nor their eagerness to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

While many, including myself, think organizations like the National Council of Churches and special days like *World Communion Sunday* are good ideas, others bring up appropriate concerns, like:

Observing something called *World Communion Sunday* in which most do so by celebrating communion, which we are going to do shortly, suggests that it is an open table for all Christians, while the truth is that in many churches it is not.

Last week while on vacation in Florida I attended a Roman Catholic Church, for a couple of reasons: one, because there are no Mennonite churches in the immediate vicinity; and two, I have not visited a Roman Catholic church in which I sense the Holy Spirit’s presence more than I do at that one. Even their singing is almost as good as Mennonites. But then comes the time for celebrating communion, that which the Roman Catholic Church’s mass brings all their focus on, and I know that I, along with many other Christians are not welcome at the table. That has been the history of most Mennonite churches as well. If you were not a member in good standing in that specific congregation, you were not welcome at the table.

Observing something called *World Communion Sunday* suggests that all the different churches and denominations throughout the nation and the world are much more united than they really are. While unity is one of the articles of our *Confession of Faith* it is just one of twenty-four articles. To say there is unity when there is no unity is no different than when the prophet Jeremiah said “Peace, peace, they say, when there is no peace”(Jer. 6:14). We can’t manufacture unity anymore than we can manufacture peace. While not all of us agree with everything that is in the twenty-four articles of our *Confession of Faith*, some are more important than others, and each congregation needs to decide for itself those which are most important.

Observing something called *World Communion Sunday* one day a year, though often unintentionally, ignores all the injustice and oppression that exists in the world, including hunger. Which is why events like the Crop Walk are often scheduled on this same day.

Or most importantly, especially for us self sufficient Mennonites and many others, observing something like *World Communion Sunday*, suggests that the act of communion is our achievement. To the contrary, ordinary food – made from grain and grapes become the extraordinary gifts of God – through a power not our own. Our only task is to prepare our hearts and to receive the gifts (take, bless, break and share). And when we do, we acknowledge that as the people of God we have found new life in Jesus Christ, despite whatever differences we might have. We receive our entire life together as one colossal unearned gift.

Which is what our passage of Scripture this morning from the prophet Isaiah is all about:

⁶*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.*⁷*And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.*

⁸*He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.*

⁹*It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”*¹⁰*For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain, Isaiah 25:6-10a (ESV)*

There is nothing in that passage that suggests that salvation is accomplished by any effort of our own. We spend more time examining ourselves when the truth is celebrating communion is not about ourselves, celebrating communion is about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. “Let us rejoice in his salvation.”

There are tremendous similarities between the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah and that of the prophecy of the beloved disciples John in the New Testament in the Book of Revelation:

⁹*After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.*¹⁰*And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”*

¹¹ All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen!"

¹³ Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?" ¹⁴ I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. ¹⁶ 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. ¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'"

Revelation 7:9-17 (NIV)

The time is coming when God will gather His people from all nations; from the north, south, east and west. The communion feast that we celebrate here on earth is meant to be just a glimpse of the great feast to come, again not due to any effort of our own but only due to what God has done for us through his Son, Jesus Christ. All we can do is prepare our hearts to receive the gift: take, bless, break and share.