

## The Table Is His

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The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time  
World Communion Sunday  
October 2, 2011

Exodus 20:1-20  
Philippians 3:10-12  
John 17:6-21a

Text: "That they may all be one." -- John 17:21a

The text for this morning's sermon is the motto of the United Church of Christ: "That they may all be one." You'll find that motto running around the perimeter of the denomination's seal, which you can find all over our church. It's on the back panel of the bulletin, it's on the banner that greeted you when you came in the door this morning, and it's on some editions of the pew Bibles.

"That they may all be one" is our brand. It's our identity. Some of you, especially those of you who may be new to the UCC, may think that "God is still speaking" is our motto; it's not. It's a slogan from a church-growth campaign – the Still Speaking Initiative – and useful in its way, but it's not the core identity of the United Church of Christ. Our core identity comes from Jesus's prayer for his disciples in the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John. It's his prayer that we, his followers, may all be one.

Now, like most words from the realm of symbols, these words mean more than one thing. At the level of appearances, they are, quite simply, laughable. Christianity, the name we give to the big group of people who call themselves followers of Jesus, is anything but one in appearance. We are split into thousands of little groups, some calling themselves "the" Christian church, some calling themselves denominations, some calling themselves nothing but followers of Jesus. Our splintering started very early. Peter and Paul, two of the earliest and most influential disciples of Jesus, split just a few years after Jesus's death and resurrection; you can read about their decision to agree to disagree in the book of Acts.

Other splits followed. By the year 250, for example, there was a group of Christians called Novatianists, after a priest in Rome named Novatian who held that Christians who had renounced their faith under persecution could not be readmitted to the church. Pope Cornelius, representing what was already by then the Christian establishment, took a more lenient view and excommunicated Novatian, who promptly was consecrated pope by three Italian bishops, thereby becoming the first or possibly second antipope.

Two hundred years later, the church broke apart again after the Council of Chalcedon, which declared that Christ has two natures, one fully human, one fully divine. The dissenters said that this made Jesus two people, not one, and that the only logical way to understand Jesus as God incarnate is as a new, single divine-human being with a single divine-human nature, monophysitism, as it's called. Monophysites became the

heretical schismatics of the fifth century.

And so on. Another huge break between eastern and western Christianity, often called the Great Schism, occurred in 1054. Five hundred years later was another big break in the western branch called the Protestant Reformation, within which there were other breaks between the Lutheran branches of the Reformation, the Reformed branches that include us, and the Anglican branches that include the Church of England and America's Protestant Episcopal Church.

And the breakage continues to this day. The Christian church is a collection of splintered groups that, on one level, makes a mockery of Jesus's words, "That they may all be one."

But appearances don't tell the whole story. On another level, the more important level, the Christian church, by virtue of its still claiming the name of Christ, remains a unified whole. Despite all the disagreements, all the fissures and all the ruptures, there is still such a thing as the Christian church. It's a single reality, imperfect and flawed, but clearly recognizable. It's like one of the teapots I have at home. The glaze is filled with tiny fractures, but it still holds tea.

And today, World Communion Sunday, is our annual reminder of the single most thing that holds us together. It's not the way we celebrate communion, because different branches of the church do that differently. Nor is it the way we think about communion, what we call our theology of communion, because we differ, sometimes violently, over what we think happens at communion to the elements and to us.

No, what unifies us through communion, and why we use the verb "celebrate" when we refer to communion, is not what we do for God with words and gestures and bread and grape juice, but rather what God has done and continues to do for us in the life and work of Jesus Christ. That's what communion is all about. It's our response to something God has already done.

And if you listen carefully to the words that are spoken at communion – communion in our church, communion in a Baptist church, or communion in a Catholic church – one of the things you will always hear is an invitation. An invitation not from the minister or the priest or the elder, but an invitation from God, because the Christian church, everywhere, all the time, has always recognized in what we call its eucharistic theology that the table does not belong to us. It belongs to God.

Our recognition that it is not our table, but rather it is God's table to which we are invited is what unites us as Christians in communion. It is the fundamental point of agreement among all of us. And that agreement rests on a fundamental theological realization, which is that when we had tried to destroy God's love in physical form among us, God responded not in kind with more violence, but rather with an invitation. An invitation to come and eat.

We recognize, every month, that that invitation has been extended to us, and I hope, as we form a large circle around the sanctuary in a little while to pass the elements from one to another, that you will recognize that God's invitation has been extended to everyone, and that there are people all over the world and down through the ages who have accepted God's invitation, just as we have, and that their acceptance unites us, irrespective of whatever differences of form and thought divide us. Jesus's words for his disciples were and are true, not thanks primarily to them back then or to us here and now, but rather thanks to the the power of the gracious love behind them.

For the gift of God's refusal to let violence be the last word, for the gift of the invitation to come and eat, and for the gift of grace that allows us and all to say yes, may our response be thanks and thanks and ever thanks. Amen.