

Risk, Fear and Following

The Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey
Exodus 17:1-7; Matthew 21:23-32
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
World Communion Sunday – October 1, 2023

World Communion Sunday has to do with the unity of the church around the world. As we gather at the communion table, our eyes are open to recognize that we are not a church unto ourselves here at Lewinsville, nor in the Presbyterian Church (USA), not even the Protestant Churches, nor even in the churches of the United States. The church is a global fellowship, all around the world, in a wild variety of shapes, forms, structures, practices, and beliefs. What unifies us is that Jesus Christ is Lord, though it can sometimes seem that everything else is wide open.

World Communion Sunday wants to argue that the effectiveness of the church's witness to the world, the impact that the church's mission will have on our world, depends on church unity. In John 13, at the Last Supper, Jesus tells his followers, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." According to Jesus, the quality of our missional witness to the world depends on the quality of Christians' love for other Christians. Importantly, Jesus does not say that we must agree with one another. Jesus says that the church around the world must love another.

You may have noticed that the church around the world does not appear united. There are more than 2 billion Christians in the world, but in the United States alone, there are more than 200 different denominations, and according to one estimate, there are more than 45,000 denominations in the world. So some may question whether talk about church unity is meaningful at all.

Ultimately, however, church unity already exists, underneath and beyond all of our divisions. Church unity is already a reality, because ultimately our unity is not in anything that *we* do. When we make our unity too much about things that we do, we are putting ourselves at the center of the church, and friends, we do not belong at the center of the church. This table does not belong to us. Our unity, across all of our denominational and doctrinal divisions, is not found in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ. He is our unity, our unity is in him, and he is one. The church may be very divided, on a whole host of things. And we need to think through our differences, we need to advocate for our beliefs and our convictions. But Jesus is not divided. Church unity already exists and cannot be broken, because church unity is in Jesus Christ. All we can do is to fail to discern and express and live out the unity of the church.

The authority and direction for our lives always comes from God. In Exodus 17, when Moses is in the wilderness with God and the people are complaining for the very legitimate reason that they don't have any water, Moses doesn't act like he must solve this problem all on his own. Moses doesn't just talk with his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam. Moses takes his direction from God. The Lord tells Moses, "Go and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink."

Now, I think we can get hung up on what looks an awful lot like a magic trick of getting water out of a rock. But what we must see here is that Moses was living his life out of a dialogical, interactive relationship with God. Moses took his directions from God, because he knew that the question the Israelites were asking in the desert, which is the same question for us in everything we do, is "Is the Lord among us or not?"

In Matthew 21:23 when Jesus himself confronts the chief priests and the elders in the temple, only 11 verses after driving out the money changers in the same temple and aggressively turning over their tables, the chief priests and elders ask him a question about authority. "By what authority are you doing these things?" They want to know which religious leader or organization had given him permission for his actions.

In response, Jesus tells them a story about two sons, one of whom, the text says, "did the will of his father." Jesus' purpose was to do the will of his Father. Jesus was taking his direction from God. The church's mission and ministry and unity must find its direction, not in what will please other people, not in what will make people happy, but in what God is calling us to do, at this time and in this place. That is where we will find our grounding.

You, friends, are part of the global fellowship of the church. Church unity already exists – with the Baptists and the Lutherans and the Catholics and the Orthodox and the Mennonites and the other Presbyterians and the non-denominationalists and the fundamentalists and the Pentecostals and so many others that we'd be here for a long time trying to name them all, including those Christians who wouldn't want to be associated with us, and those Christians with whom we may not want to be associated. For better and for worse, we are all part of the same family, because church unity is found in Jesus, he is our head, he provides us with our direction, his love for the least and the last and the lost must become our love for them, his readiness to stand with the despised of the world must become our own, and his willingness to lay down his life in love for the world must become our readiness to do the same. Our direction, our authority, our unity comes from Christ.

To the triune God be all glory, honor, and praise, now and forever. Amen.