

“The God of All the World”
Genesis 2:18-24
October 4, 2015, World Communion Sunday
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This is World Communion Sunday, a day set aside about 75 years ago by a number of Christian churches to celebrate our oneness in Christ through the celebration of communion. The world was a dangerous place back then in the late 1930's. However, they felt they needed to do something to turn the world away from the brink of war and show their unity in Christ around the Lord's Table. The world did go to war a few years later, however the idea of World Communion lived on and I am glad we still celebrate it today on the first Sunday of October. I hope our sermon topic is big enough for a World Communion Sunday?

I had a friend who had a friend who gave away more money in his adult lifetime than most of us ever manage to earn in ours. He used to send his church, a Presbyterian one down in Florida, a million dollars each year as long as the pastor promised that the congregation would spend it entirely on benevolences or mission. He often said, “Let the regular givers pay the light bill—the Lord told me to take care of the poor and needy.” My friend asked him once, “Why do you do this?” He smiled and said, “I promised the Lord that since he had been so good to me (he was taking inventory at 55 you see) I would give him fifty percent of everything I earned the rest of my life.

He was following the Bible which says, “We who are strong ought to bear the burdens of the weak.” (Rom. 15:1) So he built a burn unit in Santo Domingo in memory of his wife, he built a nurses' residence in India, he founded a hospital in China to name just a couple.

His concern was for mission which is a lovely thought for this World Communion Sunday, as we and Christians all around the globe are celebrating the Sacrament. For a couple centuries it was the motto of the Christian church to follow the command of Jesus in Matt. 28, “Go into all the world with the good news of the gospel.” Then in the 1970's and 80's we began to hear, “Let's take care of our own. Let the rest of the world take care of itself!” Foreign missions, concern for God's children in faraway countries, spreading the good news to the ends of the earth, are not usually at the top of the local congregation's priority list. Let me add, I am glad it is not that way here, thanks to Tommy Jackson's work in world missions and our Honduras mission trip which we will do for a second time next March and our work in Haiti we have a stake in world missions along with the Mission Fair that Mary Burton has arranged for this coming weekend right here in our building.

We here in Athens can help to lead the way by saying that all the nations of the world belong to each other and need to be together. If there is one sure way to save us all, it would be to share the

love of Jesus Christ with everyone, everywhere. I know it is a tough task. There is such poverty and human suffering in Asia, Africa and the Middle East today. But it will take all of us working together to make it happen.

We have to work at bringing the world a little closer to where you and I live. We have to do it because that is the way God intended the world when first he created it. He had community in mind when he started the cycle of life that has evolved down to you and me. We have to bring the world a little closer because our survival depends on it. Maybe the world is not as scary this year from the threat of nuclear war. But it is still a scary place when you think of the dangers to the environment. A tropical storm/hurricane churning up the east coast today is a reminder that you and I aren't in charge. We have to acknowledge that we are all part of the same world and when something happens in one part of the world it has consequences in another. A war in Syria brings refugees and immigrants to Germany, coffee grown in Ethiopia is served in the Atrium of our church; soot from the fires in Montana and Washington darken the skies in Michigan. We begin to see the picture of how the world is interrelated.

Genesis 2 tells the second creation story in the Bible. The first chapter of Genesis starts with those wonder words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Genesis 1 is told from the perspective of a God who speaks and causes things to happen. A God, it seems, a bit removed from the activity. Genesis 2 brings God up close and personal. It tells the creation story from the perspective of God walking and moving upon the face of the earth. "God reaches down and picks up a handful of dust and shapes him a human being." Louis Ginzberg (Legends of the Bible) tells of the creation story this way, "Go and fetch Me dust from the four corners of the earth, and I will create man therewith."

Genesis 2 also shows God at times acting with human traits (called anthropomorphisms) like the idea of God reaching down and picking up a handful of dust, or God walking with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening in the Garden of Eden. It says that God created Adam and Adam was lonely. In Genesis 1 after each act of creation the writer adds, "and God saw that it was good thus ended the day." In Genesis 2 when Adam shows up lonely it is like saying, "it is not good." Something is missing. A helpmate is needed. So, God calls forth all creatures of earth and parades them before Adam. Ginzberg, again in his myths and legends from Jewish history states, "Adam is barely an hour old when God parades the animals before him. And God is surprised at the wisdom of Adam. He cries out the names, 'That is a horse, that is a lion, that is a camel.'"

No helpmate is found among the creatures of earth. The story then moves to a deeper level. The creative power of God is called upon once again. The mystery and surprising turns of the story is about to round another corner. God is not going to be the helpmate for Adam. Yet, we are not to suffer in our aloneness. No other creature in the animal kingdom will do; it must be something new. The good news of this episode, as Walter Brueggemann declares is, "The well-being of the man requires a fresh creative act of God."

That speaks to me of the uniqueness and wholeness of women. I know this text has been used to show the subordinate role of women to men. But that is, in my opinion, a misreading of the text. What is presented is the distinct creative moment of God creating woman. It is not man finding himself a creature. It is not man manipulating the situation to come up with a second class being. It is the creative power of God at work. The result is as stunning and surprising and fresh and unpredictable as the creation of man. It is only natural, then, that the two creatures of surprise belong together.

This is the crowning point of the creation story—the fulfillment of humanity has now been reached. God has finished his work of creation. All things are under his dominion. They are placed in the garden where there is to be mutuality and equity. The two will learn to live together.

We, like Adam and Eve, are placed upon God’s earth for a purpose. The garden we are placed in is really the whole wide earth. It was, like us, created for a purpose. It is to support us, and we as caretakers must take care of it. The legends again say that when God was about to create humans the earth objected. It cried out that it could never support the “herds of people” who would be the descendants of humankind. But God persuaded earth it would be okay. God said, “You take care of ‘the people’ during the day and I will take care of them by night.” The sleep that fell over Adam is like the sleep that God gives us each night to rest our bodies and to shower us with the best care anyone could ever receive.

Our part is to learn to live in this community in which we have been placed. Not to live like the two men in a rowboat. One man suddenly starts to bore a hole in the bottom of the craft. When challenged, he says angrily, “This is none of your business. I am boring the hole under my seat!”

I remember watching an interview some time ago with John Templeton, one of the most famous voices in American stocks and finance and a devoted Christian. The interviewer asked him about the ups and downs of the market just after 9/11. He replied, “The market seems terrible these days. Everybody is upset and worried about where it is going to go.” “What do you think will happen?” he was asked next. “It depends on a lot of things,” he said, and then he added, “I have come to the point; however where I tell our people that it is time to invest in the global world markets. It is one of the best chances to be successful.” In other words, look to the whole wide world.

Some of you know of the work of Marc Chagall in Israel, the great Jewish painter, a designer of stained glass windows, the likes of which we seldom see. When Marc did the “White Crucifixion,” he dressed Jesus Christ in the traditional tallith of a Jewish Rabbi. After all, they called him Rabbi. Jesus was a Rabbi. I think Chagall was saying that there would never have been a Holocaust, if the world had remembered that Jesus was a Jew. Would we have ever

permitted the atrocities, and would we hold on to the lingering opinions of how we feel about people because they are Jewish, if every picture we had of Jesus made him look like a Rabbi?

Where I grew up there were many people who were poor just like here in Athens. There were people who worked hard but who lived from small paycheck to small paycheck. Then I recall in our society we came to believe that the poor are poor because they are getting what they deserve; if they only worked harder, and saved their money, they could succeed. We even have preachers on TV preaching what is called “the Prosperity Gospel” which is basically God wants everyone to have everything they need and if you are NOT getting your share of it then it is your fault.

But in my forty plus years of ministry with countless people I have come to see people who get mired in poverty through no fault of their own. Like the thousands of poor refugees in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq or in Central and South America or in our own cities. They do not choose to be poor. No one wants to be hungry or homeless. Our own experience right here at First Presbyterian with the IHN program has shown us up close and personal the face of homelessness and what people will give up in order to change their circumstances. There are many reasons why it happens. Sometimes it is self-inflicted through addictions or bad decisions. But often it comes by time and chance and the accident of where you are at what time.

We are all in this mortal life together. There is only one planet Earth, only one place where we know we can live and breathe and enjoy our freedoms and our families and our friends and ourselves. We need to share the love of Christ to let the light of the good news shine on those in the farthest corners of the Earth.

The Bible says, “You re the light of the world. A city set upon a hill cannot be hid. Neither do people light a candle and put it under a bushel, but on a stand and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before others, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”