

“Blessing the World”

Psalm 103

Matthew 5: 1 – 12

October 1, 2017

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Every day, but especially on this day, we say ‘Thank you, God’. Thank you, God, not only for the beauty of the earth, for the richness, the complexity, the diversity but for the beauty of the church that is the Body of Christ around the world. Thank you, God, for the blessing of the rich, complex, diverse followers of the way of Jesus, those who try to live as Easter people, holding fast to the promise of a resurrection spirit that lives and moves among us all of our days.

Last Sunday as our (amazing) team from Woodland gathered for the CROP walk, walking to raise money for those who are hungry in the world, many of us had on our Woodland Christian Church t-shirts. There was a friend of one of our walkers who was walking with us but wearing the shirt from her church, a shirt that had a Methodist symbol on it. When she said something to me about it, I told her of an old saying that we in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) like to pull out and wave around, that we are ‘Christians only but not the only Christians!’ On this Sunday, we celebrate the many manifestations of church. We give thanks for the many denominations of Christians within our city; Catholic and Protestant and all of the many flavors of the Protestant church; Lutheran, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Disciple, Bretheran, Mennonite, Quaker, UCC, UU, and on and on and I don’t know about you but there’s a part of me that pictures God looking down on us on this day and thinking, ‘Oh why can’t it be like this day always? Why can’t they just all get along, not be so divided?’

But of course, this isn’t Lexington Communion Sunday, or even Kentucky Communion Sunday or even the United States of America Communion Sunday but World Communion Sunday, when we celebrate the oneness of the body of Christ throughout the world. And as we step out into the unfamiliar, as we learn about our oneness in the midst of our diversity, our faith is so often blessed by the faith of others.

One of our missionary partners, Paul Turner, shares about the lengths that church members in the Disciples of Christ Churches in the Congo sometimes have to go through. *We* hurriedly stop by the grocery store on the way to church to pick up a bottle of grape juice. But grape juice is a luxury in many places in Congo and it doesn’t store very well in the heat. So, a soft drink called Vitalo is sometimes used because of its red color. But that isn’t even available in many places. So local churches have to improvise and sometimes crush spinach seeds and mix them into water to get a red coloring. When I think of the lengths that some of our brothers and sisters in Christ go to in preparation for the Lord’s Supper, I am humbled and awed and come with more reverence to a meal that I sometimes take for granted.

And then there is the witness of one of our partner churches in Mexico that blesses us as well. Kathleen Moyer, a long-term volunteer at one of our partner churches, tells the story about taking communion one Sunday. She was aware that this particular church didn’t have communion every week but when she walked in, knew that this week there would be because the communion trays were on the table. And the communion cups were filled. But not just filled;

they were topped off to the extent it required some effort to avoid spilling the juice. The pastor of the church, Pastor Rogelio Espino Flores, told her later that it was not by accident. The filled to nearly overflowing cups are intended to make a theological statement. ‘Mi Copa esta rebosando’ – my cup overflows. It’s an occasion of celebration and joy and a reminder to all present there and to all of us that our cup overflows, not just at our table, or that table, but God’s grace is present and overflowing around the world.

On World Communion Sunday we celebrate the many ways that the church of Jesus Christ in all of its diversity is a blessing to our faith. However, it’s much more. It’s a time to remember as well how God’s blessing reaching out to the world.

Today’s reading from the gospel of Matthew is so very familiar; blessed are the meek, blessed are the peacemakers, blessed are you who mourn and so on. We know it as the sermon on the mount. In Matthew’s gospel, that sermon is a combination of other parts put together that begins with the beatitudes; the blessings. Because of the way the text is put together, most scholars agree that the exact audience in Jesus’ time is lost; we have the gospel writer’s audience in the passage as the disciples and the crowd. But we know that the gospel writer’s *reader* audience is the church, a church community that is not isolated from the world but aware of and open to the world.

On this World Communion Sunday, may we read the text with global lenses, may we hear the text as a message around the world. ‘Blessed are you, church’ in all corners of the world. That those sitting around at Jesus’ feet, hear these words of blessing are from all walks of life and all nations. And one very important thing to notice is that God’s blessings are extended to situations that are often not looked upon with favor in the world; the meek, the peacemakers, those who mourn; having a sense of reversal from might and power of Empire to remind those that God’s kingdom often follows another way, is focused on another set of values.

As we contemplate the many ways that the church universal has blessed our lives and the many ways God has blessed the worldwide church, may we also reflect on how we are called to extend God’s blessing that overflows our cups. How are we called to bless others in ways that bring life and light to their lives?

On this World Communion Sunday in 2017, as I think about our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, my heart goes out especially to our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico. I think of our church, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) that is so strong there and the many Puerto Rican Disciples who have blessed my life; David Vargas who headed the Office of Latin America and the Caribbean of Global Ministries – my ‘boss’ while I was in El Salvador, who became head of Global Ministries, our denomination’s body that serves the world...and I think about how his heart is breaking right now as he hears word of his homeland and his family. I think about Ailsa, a young Puerto Rican who led church groups in rebuilding homes destroyed by floods in Honduras then came back to her home state of North Carolina, was ordained and serves a church there. How her heart must be breaking right now as she wonders about grandparents and extended family on the island.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican Disciples on the mainland have been such a blessing to the body of Christ in so many ways. Now, in their time of need, the church is reaching out to them. The Pension Fund of our denomination has sent extra funds to Disciples pastors there. Church Extension is reaching out with capital to help rebuild destroyed buildings. Week of Compassion is working through our partners there to try to get aid to those most in need. In those concrete ways, the church, the body of Christ, the hands and feet of Christ in the world, are able to be a blessing to the very vulnerable at this time.

We as a church are called to be a blessing to the world; to extend the message of God's love for all through both word and deed. It all often seems to be overwhelming. So, may we remember the good news that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate and the message of this day with us; that around the world we are united through him who loved us.