

Morning Announcements Intro:

Good morning and welcome to Morningside Presbyterian Church. At Morningside we welcome all because we believe we extend that welcome on behalf of our Lord Jesus who welcomes all. It's World Communion Sunday here at Morningside and we join churches around the world in celebration. In World Communion Sunday we remember joyfully that we are not Christians all by ourselves, neither are we the congregation of Morningside all alone but we are Christians with those who have gone before us and with Christians around the world worshipping God today. This is symbolized in the beautiful collection of breads from around the world on the communion table. As we worship here this morning we are with those who are worshipping God in a sanctuary with mud walls, walls of corrugated steel sheets, or no walls at all; we are with those who worship in other tongues and other denominations; we are even with those who do not worship God and so we praise and give thanks on their behalf. In this individualistic culture of ours we celebrate there is no such thing as being a Christian all alone. By the Spirit we are part of world wide community and through the mystery of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we all gather around Christ's Heavenly Table and share in the joyful feast of our risen Lord.

If you are a visitor with us this morning, know that this is a special Sunday and unlike most Sundays here in the order and experience of things...

Let us Pray:

Teach us, O God, by your Word and Spirit.
Help us to hear, know, and live the gospel,
so that we might proclaim in word and deed
the good news that you offer us this day—
a message of peace to the whole community,
and love with faith through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sermon:

I.

One of my favorite stories in the New Testament is one that comes from the beginning of the book of Acts. Many of you have heard me go on about this story before but it bears repeating for World Communion Sunday, which is one of my favorite celebrations in the church year by the way. It is through my own engagement with the global church that I discerned my own call to ministry.

The resurrected Jesus is with his disciples and he's about to leave them again so they are anxious. I'm sure they are still a little traumatized by his death and in shock from his resurrection. They have been through a great ordeal and as they stand before the Lamb of God they don't know what to do next. Jesus tells them that their job is simple: "Be my witnesses," he says. "Be my witnesses here in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." **Witnesses.**

I love this story because I can really relate to the questions and uncertainty and even a bit of the anxiety. It's like, "OK, I've followed you, I believe in your resurrection, now what

am I suppose to do?” Jesus’ answer is simple: “Go look for me. Go meet me in the people of this city. Then go meet me in the communities beyond your city. Get outside of your comfort zone and go look at what I’m doing in other communities and get to know those brothers and sisters. Then really get outside your box and witness what I’m doing around the world. Go witness my love and care for the woman in Haiti whom we heard earlier singing praise to God out of her despair, and be with her. Go witness the way people praise me in other churches, other traditions and other languages. Whatever you do, go! Witness.” Then he ascends into heaven **on a cloud – yeah it says a cloud took him away**, and the disciples are just staring up into the sky like: “Did that really just happen?” and it says two people in white robes, again with the white robes, came up to them and said, “What you looking at? He’s gone, so go.” And that is what we are called to do. Not just stand around and stare into the heavens, but to go and witness the work of Jesus in our communities and beyond, to the ends of the earth and to join in worship with our brothers and sisters there. That is what World Communion Sunday celebrates, but let this be the beginning. For a world that is broken and hurting, let our worldwide unity in the witness of Christ be a demonstration of the healing of God and an invitation to radically inclusive and compassionate community.

II.

In the reading from Revelation, John of Patmos shares his mythopoeic apocalyptic vision and describes seeing thousands upon thousands of people gathered before God’s throne; people from every nation, every tribe, speaking every language, and they are praising God, singing of salvation for they have just come from a great ordeal, from a great struggle. Life is very often a great ordeal. Life can be tough, and it’s unjustly tougher on some. As tough as it is, John’s vision is of this great diverse mass of people gathered together before the throne of God singing of salvation. It is a vision of hope and that community of hope is multinational, multicultural and multilingual and I’m hoping tropical because they found some palm branches somewhere. John’s vision of an immigration friendly eternity may not sound like the country some people want to live in but it is the vision of the Kingdom of God. And not only are these people safe but they are promised shelter, food, drink, protection from the sun and heat and the compassion of a God who will guide them to the water of life and sit with them and wipe away the tears from their weary eyes. This is what we celebrate with brothers and sisters around the world, with those who are going through a great ordeal, with those who suffer and those who rejoice, we gather in our beautiful diversity and we praise God. Life is hard, the world is not as it should be, but God is still God and we still join Jesus at his table.

III.

The Reverend Dr. Hugh Thompson Kerr served as pastor of the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA for 32 years before he retired in 1945. That means through two World Wars and the Great Depression, Dr. Kerr, led Bible studies, visited the sick in his congregation, joined them for meals around their dining room tables, performed funerals and weddings and every Sunday resolutely climbed into the pulpit at Shadyside to deliver the sermon he had prepared. He proclaimed the Good News of the kingdom of God while the newspaper headlines declared what very well may have felt like the apocalypse at hand.

In the early fall of 1933, the nation was at its lowest point of the Great Depression. The

leaves of the trees that lined the street leading to Shadyside Presbyterian Church had turned spectacular yellows and reds, *and* men and women and children lined up along streets to receive their daily bread. 11,000 banks had failed, 25% of the population was unemployed and half of all Americans were living below subsistence levels. The first Sunday in October 1933, Dr. Kerr celebrated the first World Wide Communion Sunday with a congregation in a nation in a world that was in the midst of a great ordeal.

Dr. Kerr's son, Donald remembers the spread of World Wide Communion Sunday was slow at first – Morningside adopted the special Sunday in the mid '50's – however, by the time Dr. Kerr retired, churches across denominations, and around the world had begun to recognize the day. Donald said, "[While at the start] people did not give it a whole lot of thought. It was during the Second World War that the spirit caught hold, because we were trying to hold the world together. World Wide Communion symbolized the effort to hold things together, in a spiritual sense. It emphasized that we are one in the Spirit and the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

I love that image: God holding the world together in communion. Remember those first disciples in Acts staring up into the clouds wondering what in the world could hold their movement of love together?

IV.

I don't know about you but it feels to me like we need an effort to hold things together in our nation and in our world don't we? This week the United States marked the 294th mass shooting of the year. There are air strikes in Syria and of course more people fleeing their homes around the world. Is it possible that our simple act of gathering for a spiritual meal with all of God's people: refugees, those oppressed because of their religion, race, gender, sexuality, or age, with those who grieve, with those who fear, is it possible that this simple meal, this sacred meal, is part of God's work of holding things together through the Holy Spirit which lifts us all into the presence of God when we take communion? Melva Wilson Costen, retired worship professor at the Interdenominational Theological Center, here in Atlanta writes:

"The One who invites us to the Table reminds us that we are to live as the divine host lived. We are empowered to remember to seek reconciliation with Christ, an act that compels reconciliation also with one another. Accepting the invitation to come to the Lord's Feast demands that we actively seek reconciliation in every instance of conflict or division between ourselves and our neighbors."

So it is very much possible that in this simple act of joining in the Lord's Supper we are participating in God's activity of healing the divisions that cause so much pain and suffering and death in our world because we are each individually seeking reconciliation, asking God to rid us of fear, anger, resentments and prejudice that leads us as individuals to conflict. In the midst of world wars and neighborhood violence and family violence the action of World Communion is an act of defiant hope, unity in the face of segregation and fear.

As we will soon stand in line for our piece of bread from a common loaf, we stand in solidarity with brothers and sisters around the world in communion and the knowledge

that we do this is the source of great hope for many, especially for those who feel alone, oppressed, or persecuted for their faith.

A year ago this church sent me to Ethiopia where I met with church leaders who today are persecuted and targeted for their faith and they told me what gives them the strength to continue to care for their flock, to read scripture, sing hymns and pray in Christ's name, is knowing that we here, with the luxury of deciding whether we feel like coming to church today or not, are with them in spirit and that we pray for them. Can I ask you to pray for the leaders of the church in Ethiopia today as you come for communion? Will you pray for all who suffer because of their beliefs? As we stand for communion, we stand with all the oppressed in common union. I've been told time and again by Christians in Africa that they are praying for us. We are not alone in this faith. Those who suffer for their faith stand in solidarity with we who take our comfort for granted.

This World Communion Sunday we are invited by our liturgy, the parts of our service that incorporate other cultures, to let our minds expand and imagine ourselves in worship with Christians in other parts of the world. You will notice in communion we will be reading a Creed, a statement of faith, written by Christians from the Maasai tribe in East Africa. The creed affirms what we say we believe in the Apostles Creed yet in the context of their culture. World Communion Sunday invites us to remember times we may have worshipped in other places, in a service where you were not familiar with the customs or could not understand the language. Imagine the sounds of drums or keyboards or guitars or a brass band. Imagine there is dancing and jumping and skits. It is spontaneous and unrehearsed and it is excellent. Imagine people are speaking their prayer requests all out loud at once. Imagine there is hugging and children are running down the aisle and goats and chickens and the seasonal harvest are brought forward as the offerings. Imagine that there is complete silence as the community listens for the still small voice of the Spirit. Imagine there are ancient chants and no place to sit. Imagine worship that does not check the clock but gets lost in the Spirit. Imagine you are with a Christian who prays to Allah in her local mosque and worships Jesus in secret. Imagine you are with those who cannot safely gather for worship but through secret signs greet one another in the name of Christ. In all times we are united in worship with these our sisters and brother whose faces we may never know and yet who are close to us through the power of the Holy Spirit in Communion.

V.

Today we will celebrate communion by intinction which means that you will be invited to come forward down the center aisle to the front of the sanctuary where you may pull a piece of bread from the loaf and dip it in the cup of grape juice. For those with mobility challenges who would like to receive communion in your pew there will be servers who will gladly come to you; just give them a signal. If you do not wish to take communion please feel free to remain in your pew or come forward for a blessing. We have gluten free wafers available at my station. As you participate in communion I

invite you to imagine what it would be like to be in the company of every one of God's children around the world and throughout history because, in fact you are through the mystery of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. Imagine you are part of John's vision from Revelation before the table of God with people from every nation, every tribe speaking every tongue and that Christ himself is with you as the host of this feast and he says to all of you gathered from the sanctuary of Morningside to deserts of Syria and the Great Rift Valley of Africa, he says he will shelter you, you will hunger and thirst no more; the sun will not strike you nor any scorching heat; he will guide you to the springs of the water of life where you can find rest and God will wipe away every tear from your eyes. That is the promise of God celebrated at this table.

Communion: