

Sermon

August 3, 2008

St. Paul's Episcopal, Grinnell

I have been waiting 25 years for this day! And I know that this statement needs further explanation. I stand before you as one who is a United Methodist elder, in other words, ordained United Methodist clergy. I also stand before you as a confirmed Episcopal lay person, because I was confirmed in the Episcopal church before I became United Methodist clergy.

The communion of the saints, especially the Wesley family, rejoice when we on earth gain some small glimpse of God's eternal banquet table. Today we share in Holy Communion as a foretaste of the great Eucharistic feast that God has prepared for us. As God's own people who have been divided by denominational polity since our country's War for Independence, today we are sharing in a step in the right direction – that is, a greater unity among God's own.

Why is the Wesley family rejoicing today? They were firmly situated in both the established church and the movement that came to be called Methodism. Mother Susannah, homeschooled all of her 18 children. She modeled and taught Charles and John their first lessons in faith.

Father Samuel, was a priest in the Church of England, after being raised as a nonconformist.

John was a priest in the Church of England, and admonished all those called Methodists to partake of Holy Communion, the Eucharist, daily if possible.

Charles was also a priest in the Church of England, who wrote over 6500 hymns, including O For a Thousand Tongues that we have sung this morning. (By the way, you may be relieved that we did not sing all 18 of the original stanzas written by Charles to celebrate his conversion in 1738. That was when he wrote that his 'heart was strangely warmed'. In other words, his faith at that moment of conversion combined heart as well as head for the first time in his faith journey.

Charles' grandson, Samuel Sebastian Wesley, was Roman a noted church organist and wrote the tune of The Church's One Foundation that we have also sung this morning.

Today's Gospel, the good news that Jesus fed 5000 people, fits with an insight from one of John Wesley's sermons, Catholic Spirit, first preached in 1750. He took his text from 2 Kings 10:15: "If thine heart is as my heart, give me thine hand". Wesley works out the implications of this phrase in 10 pages of sermon text. Today's lunch would be seriously delayed if I were to work out all of Wesley's logic for you. So I will stick to the major point: If [I might say when rather than if] our hearts are in accord, let's join hands.

Notice that the statement is NOT if we agree on all faith statements – or if our theological viewpoint is the same. The statement is if OUR HEARTS are together, let's join hands. That is one reason that today is a family reunion; United Methodists and Episcopalians have always had – at the center of their faith – a sense that creeds are guidelines rather than absolutes.

Both belong to that group of denominations that view themselves as conciliar rather than creedal. In the language of agriculture, the wheat and the weeds are both present; God decides which is wheat and which is weeds. We allow God to be God; we as finite human beings do not attempt to play God by building fences to keep others from God's table. It is God's Table, not ours.

When Jesus fed the folks in today's Gospel, he did not feed only those who assented to a set of beliefs. He didn't even ask. He simply made food available to all who were in attendance, who came to hear him teach for whatever reason.

A substantial number of scholars assert that this story of Jesus feeding people was a foretaste of the eucharist. When this meal for all in attendance is a model for the church, we who today share this bread and this cup and the potluck foods waiting in the parish hall – we are enacting in some small way, God's intent for all of creation.

Jürgen Moltmann, one of the great contemporary German theologians, has gifted us with a short, easy to remember phrase to help us focus on the future: theology of hope. In other words, we are to grasp a glimpse of God's intent for God's own creation through Scripture, experience, tradition, and reason. Then we are to move into that future in every decision that we make.

The other day, I was asked where this eucharist that we celebrate this day in this place will lead. In other words, where are we going next? I admitted that we do not yet have a road map. We are more like the Lewis and Clark expedition than users of the Mapquest web site.

For example, if I were to plan a trip to Seattle, Washington, I would go to Mapquest, type in Grinnell I as the starting point, type in a specific address in Seattle as the destination, then press the directions key. I could also plan stops along the way, with appropriate accommodations for each night and restaurants for each meal.

Lewis and Clark did not have Mapquest! In fact, they could not even be sure that they had a destination. They hoped that they could reach the Pacific Ocean, but there were no certainties. In addition, they could not plan convenient stops along the way.

They had to cope with whatever each day presented, the challenges, the fears, the joys, the rewards.

As United Methodists and Episcopalians, our journey toward unity is much like the Lewis and Clark expedition. We have been empowered by our denominational structures to pursue reunion. We have been given some guidelines. Today, as we meet in this place and celebrate the eucharist, Holy Communion, we are setting out on a journey toward God's great banquet feast where all God's people will sit at table and share in the Great Eucharistic feast in God's own presence.

Until then, we take a step at a time, hoping and trusting that God is guiding us. We join hands because our hearts are in accord, we eat together as Jesus' listeners did on that hillside so very long ago, we have caught a glimpse of that great Eucharistic feast that God has prepared for all of God's own people. And we put one foot in front of the other, one step at a time, trusting that God is guiding us today and always.

AMEN.