

“OH, THE POSSIBILITIES!”
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
October 2, 2011

Acts 10:34-47

If you've ever looked at a Thursday edition of the Cecil Whig, you know that there is a religion section there every week. It's a couple of pages long, and one whole page is filled with advertisements for churches all around the county. There are an amazing number of churches in our county - each one unique in its own way.

Let me tell you some facts about these churches. Do you know that some believe in seven sacraments, others two, and still others don't believe in sacraments at all?

Do you know that some churches believe in baptism, and some don't, and for the churches that do believe in baptism, some of those only believe that you're baptized if you're totally dunked under water? Sprinkling doesn't count for them!

Do you know that some churches allow anyone who believes in Christ to receive communion, while others only let their members receive it?

Do you know that some churches only allow men to be their pastors, and one only allows single men to be their pastors?

Do you know that some churches have music and others worship in silence?

Do you know that some churches hire their own pastors and others have pastors appointed to them by a denominational authority?

You get the picture, don't you? The Christian church, in all its forms and with all its denominations, is filled with diversity. We are a wonderfully diverse group of disciples of Jesus Christ. It's something to celebrate.

Yet, I'm sad to say, that too often, it's not something we celebrate - rather we tend to point out the differences between us, and call one better than the other. We look askance at others who do things differently from us. We compare ourselves with each other. We try to defend why we're right, and they're wrong.

And too often, that's the kind of stuff non-believers or seekers see. They see us acting that way. They see us as being in competition with each other. They see us judging each other.

That was the case even back in the 1930's when the first World Wide Communion Sunday was celebrated. Everybody was struggling back then. It was war-time, and so many horrible things were going on in the world. The churches longed to find a way to help and bring healing to a hurting world.

And they did it with World Wide Communion Sunday. They wanted it to be a symbol that even diverse groups of people can come together in unity. They wanted a world of warring nations to see the possibility of working together, of focusing on that on which we agree, instead of constantly focusing on the things the ways we're different.

So the first World Wide Communion Sunday was established to tell the world that what the churches shared in Jesus Christ was far greater than their differences. No matter what their doctrine, their sacraments, their ministers and ministries - the one thing all of the Christian churches then had in common is their oneness in Christ.

And that is true today. We are different from the Presbyterians next door, the Episcopalians down the street, the Catholics over the bridge, the Baptists up the hill. We are different from them in a whole lot of ways. But the one thing we have in common is Jesus.

When we remember that, and focus on that, it is a good thing - a very good thing. Because all of a sudden, walls come down. All of a sudden, we talk to each other and learn about each other - we don't judge each other. I've told you before about the wonderful talks I've had with Pastor Alan Bosmeny of First Assembly of God. He asked me about the meaning and practices of Lent, and I asked him about their charismatic worship, including speaking in tongues. He really wanted to know about Lent, and I really wanted to know about their worship. Not because he was going to observe Lent, because they don't do that in their denomination, and not because we were necessarily going to break out in speaking tongues here. Just because we care about each other as brothers and sisters united in Christ.

And when we focus on our unity in Christ, not only do we begin to talk to each other and learn about each other, we join hands together to make a difference in the world. The churches in Elkton have done that in a number of ways - through the Community Kitchen which took place here on Friday, where hundreds of people are fed each year by the efforts of so many different churches and groups; through events like the Crosswalk and the Community Thanksgiving Eve Service, witnessing to God and God's faithfulness; and to ministries like the Rotating Homeless Shelter, literally saving lives from bitter cold weather.

We do all those things and we do them well, because we focus on what unites us - rather who unites us - Jesus; instead of focusing on all the ways we're different.

I hope the world sees it, and in fact, I know they see it.

So we all, all of us who bear the name Christian, no matter what church we find ourselves in - all of us need to continually seek and do the things that make for unity rather than division. You heard the Epistle lesson that reminded us that “God shows no partiality.” Well, if we really live like that, church to church to church, we will say something powerful to the world - our world so prone to pit one person against another, one country against another. And what we will say is: “everyone is valuable, everyone is special, everyone is a part of the fabric of the whole.”

As we begin our emphasis on Stewardship for the month of October, and as we prepare to make our financial pledges for next year, I want to invite you to remember that when you give to our church through your pledge, you are enabling this message of unity and possibility to reach the world. When you give and some of your money goes to the missions budget, you’re helping to put food on the table at the rotating homeless shelter, or pay for bulletins for a Thanksgiving Eve service, or print up flyers about the Crosswalk, or buy supplies for the Community Kitchen. When you give to the church through your offerings, you support the efforts of our church to be in ministry with all of the other churches in our area.

My friends, that support, that financial support is so needed because our witness of unity and oneness is so needed in our fractured world. You don’t need to watch the news or read a newspaper to know how stressed our world is. If it isn’t war, it’s poverty, it’s the economy, it’s mean-spiritedness, it’s constant competition. We need to step up and show the world that it can be different, and we can only do that with your support - personally, prayerfully, financially.

You know, I’m glad the Presbyterians came up with the idea of World Wide Communion Sunday in 1936. I’m glad they thought that the best way to send a message to the world was not some publicity campaign, but the simple act of all of us taking communion on the same day at least one day a year.

So today, let us give thanks that next door, and down the street, and across our town, our country and the world, we Christians gather at the one table of Jesus Christ - the One in whom we have our unity, and the One who blesses us with our marvelous diversity! I invite you, when you come to the table today, to think of one person you know in another church, or perhaps just one other church, and pray for them - thanking God that we are one in Christ Jesus with them! And when you do, know that someone, somewhere in another church is praying for you at the exact same moment. What a joy it is to be a part of the worldwide body of Christ - especially this day! Thanks be to God.

Amen.