

Sisters and Brothers

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12

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World Communion Sunday

Hebrews 1:1-4, 2:5-12 (NRSV)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, ²but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. ³He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

⁵Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels. ⁶But someone has testified somewhere, "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? ⁷You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, ⁸subjecting all things under their feet." Now in subjecting all things to them, God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, ⁹but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, ¹²saying, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you."

I remember walking down Centennial Avenue in my hometown Atlanta during the 1996 Olympic Games (sometimes you plan sermon illustrations and they fall just three rounds of voting short!), surrounded by a sea of people from nations all over the world, many donning their country's colors. It was a beautiful sight, such a diversity of people, but it was also a beautiful sound, such a diversity of languages. It was like almost no place else, except for maybe Queens.

A friend of mine volunteered for the Olympic Organizing Committee, and gave me a shirt someone gave him. I guess I wanted to feel part of things, so I wore the shirt around town. What I didn't realize was that the international visitors knew the volunteer outfit. So all of a sudden, I became a magnet for people with questions. At one particular moment, three groups approached me, one eastern European, one south American, and one asian, and smiled while they began to simultaneously speak to me. Only their questions were in languages I didn't understand. So when words didn't work, we moved to some awkward gestures, pointing around, and finally laughter. At the end, what was so memorable, was that each group apparently knew one English phrase, "thank you," which they all uttered together and then walked off smiling, as if they were sure glad they asked someone. I had no idea what anyone had asked me, or what they thought I said in reply, but apparently everyone left happy about... whatever that was.

This kind of moment was not atypical during those 16 days. It was almost what I would imagine heaven to be like: beautifully diverse, peaceful, and joyful, and lots of SPORTS.

The problem with the Olympic games, the largest and most costly event humans produce on earth, and the Olympic spirit the games try so hard to generate, is that it is all way to small and narrow to be any kind of heaven. In Atlanta, it turns out, that heavenly feeling that I just described to you, was a reservations-only banquet. An estimated 30,000 poor families were displaced from their homes to generate the venue space for the Atlanta games, laws were passed criminalizing poverty and homelessness, and anyone on the streets who

didn't go to jail got bussed out of town. That heavenly feeling I had walking those Olympic streets, it turns out, was pointed toward heaven, to be sure, but it wasn't even close to heaven. It was nice, don't get me wrong, but it turns out that the peace and joy I felt on those streets, while a good thing, was far less radical than what God has in mind.

I hope the singing and dancing and hooting and hollering folks in Rio recognize that the Olympic games aren't nearly as cool as what we're all celebrating today. Today is world communion Sunday, in which we will ritualize our solidarity with Christians all over the world, by celebrating the Lord's Supper. We celebrate communion today at a table where everyone is welcome, not just those who can afford tickets, not just those with homes to return to, not just those who worship the one true God who we all know is Presbyterian, but EVERYONE. So today we approach this table with neighbors like First Pres Wilmette, Christ Episcopal, Lutheran Ascension, and Sacred Heart; the PNFCC Korean church that has office space in this very building, with partners around the world like First Pres Havana, Gatina Church in Kenya, churches in Hungary and the Ukraine, El Salvador. We do well to remember our familiar brothers and sisters today, as well as our less familiar, maybe even less comfortable brothers & sisters like the American megachurch, the small Baptist church in a farming town, the European cathedral, the poor rural Pentecostal church in Chile, the urban Presbyterian church in South Korea. Christ tasted death for everyone, says the text, bringing many children to glory by suffering for them, and calls them all brothers and sisters.

Today we certainly celebrate the scope and strangeness of a communion that spans the globe and ideological spectrum. But we also celebrate the mysterious power of the gospel that brings us together and never leaves us the same.

Dr. Robert Wall tells about a world communion Sunday moment at a small church in a fishing village about thirty years ago that illustrates the kind of heaven we celebrate at this table. This was a typical community, full of good-meaning people trying to live faithful lives, but the church community happened upon an uncomfortable kind of change. This was the 70s, cultural and racial integration was unfolding across the country. A local war veteran married a black woman named Marian, the first person of color to move into the town as far back as anyone could remember, and she started coming to church. Some dealt with Marian's presence more gracefully than others, but Debbie the communion preparer in the church wasn't one of them. Debbie refused to come back to the church, claiming "it is not how I was raised, church just isn't the same anymore," and wasn't seen for weeks.

Then around came World Communion Sunday, Debbie's favorite Sunday, as it turns out, and Dr. Wall noticed during the worship service that Debbie had slipped into the sanctuary in the back, not wanting to be seen by anyone in the congregation, and in so doing, she unknowingly sat down right next to a lady named Marian. The pastor gave the invitation to the Lord's Table as he always did: "Friends, this is the joyful feast of the people of God. Many will come from east and west, from north and south, and sit at the table in the kingdom of God." Communion was served with folks sitting at the communion table, each receiving a piece of bread and a small cup of wine. Well, as the spirit would have it, the church ran out of little cups, and the pastor saw no other way than to invite those remaining to partake of the common cup, the chalice. Dr. Wall anticipated an epic communion moment of embarrassing hysterics, and prayed to God for deliverance. Marian took the cup, drank from it, and passed it to Debbie, who also drank, and then passed the cup on. This epic moment went by rather quietly. Dr. Wall closed this particular world communion celebration with the words: "Lord, let now your servant depart in peace; for my eyes have seen your salvation."¹

This world communion Sunday is one in which we celebrate our sisterhood and brotherhood, and hopefully, in the spirit of the gospel, crawl just a bit closer together.

There is one more communion we celebrate today, and it is perhaps the hardest communion to grasp – communion with God. I think that the writer to the Hebrews would admit, it's easier to conceive of our relationship with strangers in every corner of the world, than it is to conceive of our relatedness to God. What

are human beings that you are mindful of them, says the text for today, or that you care for them? How can this be, that the God of heaven would be mindful of and care for all people? Furthermore, how can this be, that God in Heaven would come down, even lower than the angels, to walk and be with us, to know our struggles and our sufferings? How can this be, that rising above suffering and death, God raises people into glory again with them? In Hebrews, we hear that each how-can-this-be IS, and the truth transports us to someplace new.

This text is a Holy Communion of the variety that we celebrate in worship, a journey described beautifully by Rev. Dr. James Kay as something like this. This verbal eucharist takes us up into the heavens, into the brotherhood of Christ, into communion with God the Father. We are overwhelmed and lifted up by the word, and as we are lifted up, we are also carried with the reality of the human suffering of Christ for all brokenness. Something had gone wrong in the cosmos, something had gone wrong in the midst of humanity, and only God could set things right. In the midst of this communion transportation we are all drawn into the story of God's redemption. In the very act of receiving communion together, we are taken up and offered up as Christ was, and in so doing, made brothers and sisters of Christ and each other.²

Today we think about the world with which we celebrate communion at this very table. Today we also think about the cosmos, the great space in which the divine drama takes place, the great space in which each one of us ought to be insignificant. We think about the radical claim and promise God makes in Jesus Christ, that in this great space you and I and every single person everywhere, in all our lowliness... MATTER, like sisters and brothers, with the capacity to be raised to a new life, a new life set at a table in heaven, with each other, and perhaps even more remarkably, with God.

¹ Rev. Dr. Robert Wall, *Christian Century*, September 28, 1988, p.828.

² Rev. Dr. James Kay, *Feasting on the Word*, Vol. 4, Year B, Proper 27.