

The Rev. Dr. Eric O. Springsted
Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC
October 4, 2009

Text: Hebrews 2:5-12

Not Ashamed to Call Them Brethren

Today is World Communion Sunday, a day on which Christian churches of varying stripes make a deliberate effort to celebrate the Lord's Supper. By doing so, they intend to show in the common gift of the sacrament of communion, and the common Lordship of Jesus Christ, a Lordship that transcends whatever differences might exist between denominations. Thus in a further sense what we celebrate this Sunday is not only a symbol of a common Lord, but the symbol of a hope for a common future in that Lord. As the Letter to the Hebrews states in this morning's epistle lesson, Christ brings to glory those who are his brothers and sisters -- brothers and sisters because we and he have a common Father.

World Communion Sunday began in 1936 and the Presbyterian Church invented it. Its original intent was to show the sacramental unity of Presbyterian churches, which, because they tended to celebrate the sacrament infrequently at the time, was something that needed to be visibly demonstrated. But even from the very beginning it was meant for other denominations as well, something that could show the unity of all the members of the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. The annual practice of World Wide Communion thus quickly spread beyond the confines of the Presbyterian Church, particularly when the program came under the auspices of the Federal Council of Churches and its successor, the National Council of Churches.

I suspect, however, that today World Communion Sunday may not have quite the same symbolic impact it once did. Since most Presbyterian congregations now celebrate the sacrament monthly, and, in some churches, even weekly, this first Sunday of October was going to be a

communion Sunday anyhow. We didn't have to go to any special effort. The same thing applies to any number of other denominations. In one sense that is good. The intent of having such a Sunday has succeeded: sacramental practice has become more universal. However, as we have become accustomed to a more frequent celebration of communion, to the practice of the ancient church, we may no longer think about its ecumenical meaning. We may well forget that we are all in this together, and that this morning we are sharing across the world in the same body and blood; and we may well forget the common future that God has in mind for us.

For those reasons we ought to celebrate openly and consciously this day as World Wide Communion, and to use this celebration to continue to increase ecumenical cooperation among the parts of Christ's body, in the hope that this fractured body may again become whole. It is a hope that we need to keep alive. Again, the Letter to the Hebrews points out that Christ, the pioneer of our faith, who leads us all back to unity in our one Father, in doing so is not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters. For the same reason, we, too, should not be ashamed to call all other Christians, with whom we share a common brother in Christ, and therefore a common Father in heaven, our brethren. We need to overcome our differences, and stand firmly on what is an essential commonality.

For the fact of the matter is that we have often been either ashamed to call many other Christians brethren, or we have even seen them as outright enemies. They are the *Other*, we might say. Let me cite a few examples.

Like all cities in the 1950s, St. Paul, where I grew up had its various forms of segregation and separation. There were, as everywhere else, the usual unjust forms of separation that all today recognize and decry today as being unjust, such as the segregation of blacks and the exclusion of Jews from certain WASPish clubs. But it also had a certain type of separation that I

suspect most people in St. Paul, or any number of similar cities for that matter, would not have thought of as segregation. Indeed, it wasn't segregation insofar as it was by and large freely chosen by both sides, although it did have its ugly side once in awhile. What was this unique separation? It was simply the distance that existed between Catholics and Protestants. For example, although St. Paul had a lot of Catholics, especially Irish Catholics who originally came to work on the Great Northern Railroad, I never had a Catholic kid in my class until fourth grade, and even after that there was never more than one in my class until I finally went to a public high school. There the percentage increased, but still never came close to representing the city's religious demography. The reason for my lack of exposure to Catholics was simple. It was Jews and Protestants who didn't go to public schools that went to prep schools; Catholics went to parochial schools, especially in elementary school. St. Paul, in fact, had nine Catholic high schools, some of considerable size and wealth. Catholics had no reason to choose to go to school with us, nor we with them, and the reason was religious, not economic.

This separation always caused the other side to appear somewhat mysterious, although nobody had much of a desire to be on the other side and find out what was really going on over there. Oft repeated rumor seemed to suffice for information. The situation did, however, cause a certain curiosity about the other side that could be humorous. For instance, in our neighborhood, there was a convent which included both an exclusive school for girls and a real convent which housed nuns, and that had gardens surrounded by a high wall to keep the world out and the nuns in. For my Unitarian friend, Curtis, and for me, the urge to sneak into the convent grounds and run around in them was irresistible. It could be exciting even, particularly if one of the nuns saw us and began chasing us. One fall afternoon, however, we sneaked in with another kid from the neighborhood, a certain Tully Eldridge, an Irish Catholic kid if there ever was one. On this

afternoon, one of the nuns spied us, and gave chase. Now Curtis and I easily outran her and made it outside the walls to safety; Tully, however, managed to get caught. And the reason he got caught was because whenever he and the nun chasing us ran by a statue of Mary in the convent garden – and there were a lot of them – they both stopped, crossed themselves and said a quick “Hail Mary.” Needless to say, the nun was a lot faster at this than Tully was, having had a lot more experience, and so she managed finally to nab him. Curtis and I simply looked on in utter, slack-jawed amazement.

That is the humorous side of the separation. But for anybody, pretty much anywhere, who lived before Vatican II, there was also a certain undeniable antagonism between Protestants and Catholics that wasn't always very funny. Inter-marriage happened, but it was tough to accomplish. Even if one could get one's family to go along with it – and one frequently could not – to be recognized by the Catholic church the marriage had to be in a Catholic church. Furthermore, the Protestant member had to agree to raise all children as Catholics. Or consider another example. I remember a friend who had a small Presbyterian church in New Hampshire in the 1950s, telling the story of how his parish had conducted a survey of religious preference in the town, and how he had taken the list of unchurched Catholics they had discovered over to the local priest in order to be of some help to him. The priest informed him coolly that he didn't need his help and took the cards my friend handed him and dropped them in the wastebasket.

The antagonism certainly wasn't one-sided, however. On the other side of the rift, Protestants regularly and with great certainty told scurrilous tales of tunnels between the rectory and the convent that allowed the priests to slip over to the nuns and engage in great debauchery. Even in solemn documents and confessions of faith, the Protestant attack on the church of Rome rarely showed restraint. For example, in the Scots' Confession of the sixteenth century it was

deemed essential that the “true Kirk be distinguished from the filthy synagogues...” and that “the spotless bride of Christ” be differentiated “from the horrible harlot, the false Kirk.” Everybody knew that the filthy synagogues and the horrible harlot was the church of Rome.

And yet, the real reason for the existence of either church really had nothing to do with the hatred of the other one, no matter how lathered up they each got about it. In the case of both Protestants and Catholics, the dedicated purpose of the church was and is to bring the light and healing of Christ to the world. We always have had this in common. Yet, somehow for nearly five hundred years few ever saw it as a cooperative venture. It was as if the other side were systematically infected by one or a few errors and therefore, could never do *anything* right. Moreover, it seemed that if you did things cooperatively you would be infected with wrongness yourself, so it was best to stay apart.

That, fortunately, largely belongs to yesterday, and things are a lot different than they were even forty years ago. Priests and ministers now routinely participate together in marriages and funerals and other services in each other’s churches. At the highest levels, ecumenical discussions go on, and there has been a real effort, and thus some real hope, of unifying the church once again. At local levels, many of the Protestant and Catholic churches in Georgetown cooperate together in the Georgetown Ministry Center to alleviate the problems of homelessness in this very wealthy section of town, and together we pray on Good Friday. And even personally, I, the ex-convent-wall-jumper, now think with some pleasant irony on the Catholic kids in my youth orchestra car pool who brought ditto sheets from their religion class with arguments from St. Thomas Aquinas. Back then, I was dismissive of the Angelic Doctor’s arguments. Since then I have taught Thomas regularly at Presbyterian colleges and seminaries, and will even do so again in November at our adult issues class. In all these respects, we have begun to realize what

Jesus said to the disciples when he told them that “No one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For whoever is not against us is for us.”

But if things are a lot better, the hoped for future is not fully upon us. Sometimes I get the feeling that at best there is a lot of toleration, but that it is the result of indifference. I think so because, significantly, even today a lot of division and rank prejudice remains. It has been my experience, experience that comes from having worshiped in and from having served in various capacities in about ten different Presbyterian congregations, one Presbyterian college and a Presbyterian and an Episcopalian seminary that there still remains a great deal of potent anti-catholicism among us. For many Protestants if any practice or opinion smacks of Catholicism, including styles of singing God’s word, it is reason to abjure it and to reject it, and disdain it. You can provide your own examples without assistance from me. It cuts both ways, too. For many Catholics, if any opinion or practice smacks of Protestantism, it is reason to consider it heretical. Even Catholics who leave the church because they don’t like the curia’s authoritarianism, would never consider joining a Protestant church. Faithlessness seems preferable to what is considered a second rate church and therefore if you are going to turn your back on the church, there is only one church that you should consider. On both sides, therefore, we still are not always quite willing to call each other brother and sister as Christ called us.

We need to get over this, and we need to do it in such a way that we do not simply tolerate the other, but do it in such a way that we actively learn from each other, recognizing that the other side may have things that we don’t and that we would do well to take on. We need to understand that it is a matter of the faith of all Christians that whatever real good there is in the world is from Christ, and that whatever truth is ever spoken comes from the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. We need to have the faith to appreciate Christ’s presence in all good

works and all works of compassion, and we need to have the faith to test our own hearts whenever we see goodness done, even if it is done by somebody who does things differently than we do. St. Augustine once argued during a time when there was also a division of Christ's body: "There may be something catholic outside the Catholic church...On the other hand, there may exist pretenses at goodness within the church catholic, as is unquestionably the case with those "who renounce the world" in words but not in deeds...So as there may be found in the church catholic something which is not catholic, so there may be found something which is catholic outside the church catholic."

Now, to a significant degree this common searching has happened, and has happened in significant ways. Whereas it was assumed not long ago that Catholics never read a Bible, today Catholics have, in a very short time, produced some top notch biblical scholars and really do have Bible studies. The liturgical renewal of the 1960s and 1970s that has affected both Protestant and Catholic churches didn't produce a homogenized liturgy, but one that was founded on common principles and that was faithful to the common source of the ancient church's practice. Whereas Protestants used to disdain any number of spiritual practices normative to Catholicism, particularly if those practices seemed monkish, as those practices have now been liberated from an exclusive provenance in monastic institutions, they have become vital life sources for many of us. We who have always talked about the importance of the Word, actually now, thanks to a new willingness to adopt what our brethren have produced, have practices to help us contemplate it deeply and spiritually. This sort of appreciation is something that needs to happen a lot more often.

But for it to happen, we have to be more than tolerant. We have to be curious and we have to be eager to learn; we have to be humble. We have to recognize that, sometimes, what we

do is not always good enough, even for us, and that others who live by the same Lord may have the resources to help when we need more. But for that to happen, for us to take help, we have to see others as engaged in a common faith, and we have to see them as Christ saw us, that is, as brethren, who live and move and have their being in the same Lord, and by the same gifts that he gives to all of us. When we are no longer ashamed to call them brethren, and they are no longer ashamed of us, we may then find the love of a common brother and Father, and we may indeed find the glory that is promised to us.