

World House or Tree House: Who Sits at Your Table?

A prompting offered by the Rev. Barbara Battin
October 4, 2009 ♦ Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY
Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Genesis 18:1-8

God appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant." So they said, "Do as you have said." And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it and make cakes." Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and mild and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and through it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Today with sisters and brothers around the globe, we gather in the Unity of God to celebrate World Communion Sunday. This celebration began in one denomination in 1936 as a way to connect with partner churches around the world. It became more widely celebrated through the National Council of Churches and continues to be a significant moment in the life of many churches in many denominations. World Communion Sunday is perhaps my own favorite of all the high holy days in the church year.

World Communion Sunday might be viewed as the church's version of the now-common instruction to "think globally and act locally." Or perhaps a bit more accurately, to "think globally – and EAT – and drink – locally!" It is an opportunity to celebrate both the unity of the Christian church and its diversity on other continents, in cultures not like our own. Beyond the celebration of our global and local connection, it is also a time to remember that within – throughout - the Christian Church there are still challenges to our unity in Christ. The Ecumenical Movement still struggles with issues of welcome across denominational lines, still seeks to make real Jesus' hope "that all may be one." (John 17:21)

At the center of our celebration is the communion table. Today, the communion table is physically in the center of our worship space. The table reminds us of all the meals Jesus shared with people, all the meals Jesus shared with his disciples, and particularly the final meal which we have called The Last Supper. The table is the symbol on which I want to focus today.

In the nomadic desert culture of Jesus' ancestors, inviting a stranger to share a meal involved some risk. Sitting at table together was a sign of trust. Table hospitality was part of the community ethic and to refuse hospitality was as serious an offence as not offering it. In Jesus' own culture, where rigid religious

laws drew smaller circles, excluding those deemed “unclean,” Jesus enlarged the circles and welcomed those who were excluded to the table.

The table is a defining symbol of our willingness to share God’s love, of our intent to participate in God’s great embrace of diverse people, of our commitment in word and deed to God’s radical welcome and heart-enlarging hospitality.

The table around which we gather today is a welcome table. It is a place where we receive both comfort and healing for our wounds. It is also the place we are challenged to live our lives more lovingly, more open-heartedly with others. And so, my friends, my question for our meditation this morning is “Who sits at **your** table?” Having sat at *this* table, this welcome table – “Who sits at *your* table?” (Pause)

The table is also a central element in our homes. Realtors often play up the dining area in houses as the center of the house, the place of gathering for family and friends. It is of course also the place of basic physical nourishment, so the question of who sits at our table is a question of both body and soul, a question of our survival and of our core identity as human beings and as disciples of Jesus. The table is also a place of gathering for meetings at work and in the community. We talk about the “negotiating table” or simply “bringing something to the table” in raising an issues. Here are two approaches to the question of the table.

Martin Luther King, Jr. gives us the World House Vision in his 1967 book , *Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community?* He begins by saying: “Some years ago, a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominently underscored being this one: ‘A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.’ This is the great new problem of (hu)mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace....All inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors.” A vision of a world house --- who sits at the table in the world house? (Pause)

A few years ago, I attended a world communion service. Not on the first Sunday in October as is designated for World Communion Sunday, it was a Saturday in November. Not as part of the formal celebration as we are doing today, it was at the close of a conference on “Land, People and Identity” held at the International Center in Bethlehem, Palestine. I had one of those tingly moments when all of a sudden I am keenly aware of being in the Presence of God, a sacred moment indeed. After a week of intense conversation in meetings, of sharing diverse perspectives around dinner tables, of struggling with difficult issues personally and politically around meeting tables, we gathered around the table for communion. People were there from Germany, France, England, Scotland, Denmark, Sweden, the United States, Canada – all the northern European and northern American folks one might expect to sit at the table of an international conference. But there were others there too, from Egypt, from Zimbabwe, from South Africa, from the Philippines, from Malaysia, from Burma/Myanmar, from Mexico, from Brazil, from Colombia, from El Salvador. All along with people from Israel and Palestine. This was a world communion table in one room of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “world house.” North and South, East and West, young and old, even Palestinian and Israeli, all came to sit at table.

I could leave the story at that, a simple contemporary illustration of King’s vision. But I need to point out HOW they got there. These world citizens were INVITED. Invited – a call went out to come to the conference. But it was more than a “Y’all come.” The invitation held deep INTENTION. Funding was provided so that people who might otherwise not be able to come – even if included in the invitation - could come to the table.

Like Abraham in the first scripture reading today, the conference sponsors didn’t wait for folks to come, they “ran out” to meet people, to meet the needs of people so they could participate. And somewhat like the story of Abraham and Sarah, because they did, very new perspectives were shared, assumptions were challenged, ideas were refreshed, and through communion with strangers, all were fed.

Lest we forget, the strangers Abraham ran out to meet were messengers of God. Abraham risked welcoming the stranger and ran right into God. The conference leaders practiced holy hospitality and we dined ALL week in a sacred diversity that transformed us all.

It is my guess, that most if not all of us in this room, can and do affirm the World House vision where diverse people gather, rich and poor, all tints and shades of skin, a spectrum of cultures. My question to us this morning is about how we practice the vision, how we put it into practice – day by day in our institutional - and personal - lives. Do we set the table and hope people will join us for dinner? Do we invite people? Do we work with vigor and intention to include people beyond just invitation?

As you know, I work as an Interfaith Campus Minister at Sinclair Community College. What you may not know is that only a year or so ago, my title was still the Protestant Campus Minister at Sinclair. In the past few years, the people with whom I work, Dayton Ministries in Higher Education, have been practicing a portion of the World House vision. They have moved from being a Protestant based organization to a new understanding of their identity. Their new mission is to provide a “God-centered, multi-faith presence” on the Sinclair campus. Part of that movement has meant looking at who sits at the table when the DMHE Board meets. We now have Muslims and Jews on the Board and participation from both Jewish and Muslim communities in our work on campus. We continually struggle with what it means to be authentically multi-faith – not just to be open, not just to invite, but to intentionally welcome others in a way that joyfully – JOYFULLY - requires us to revise our identity and refresh our work.

Who sits at your table? Your home table, your work table, your community service table? Who sits here with us at this communion table?(Pause)

There is another way of thinking about table. It is the Tree House. In the tree house image we may need to make it a more metaphorical table and think about those with whom we are willing to share our peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. A former colleague of mine described the Tree House perspective in this way: “It is no fun having a tree house if you can’t keep someone out.”

In the second scripture story this morning, the disciples sadly model what may be called this Tree House Syndrome. They are not much into inviting or sharing, much less into intentional inclusion and holy hospitality. In this case it is the outsider, the stranger who is persistent, who challenges even Jesus to a larger vision of his own mission. And Jesus models for us the ability to change our minds, to be shown something new, to be transformed by breaking open old notions and embracing new ones.

Now I need to make my own confession. While I am absolutely committed to King’s World House, to working for it, to living in it, like the disciples, I am not immune to the Tree House.

A couple of years ago, I attended a World Communion service. It was not across the world, it was a few streets away in Kettering. It was actually on the first Sunday of October and part of the World Communion Sunday happening around the world. I had with me an Interfaith Listening Team from India, a Muslim and a Christian, a Catholic Christian, who were travelling around the country as part of a program of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We sat together in the pew, Andreas, the Christian, on the center aisle, then Ismat, the Muslim, and then me. When the bread was passed, Andreas took the bread and passed it to Ismat. Then Ismat, took the bread... and all of a sudden there was in my stomach a clutch, a twist, a moment of panic. All the echoes of the theology classes in seminary that dealt with communion issues – closed communion and open communion – issues of who can partake of the bread of love and the cup of life constellated in one moment. And the question of THAT moment for me was “what would Jesus do?” or, Tree House or World House? When the juice was passed, Ismat did not take the small cup, thinking it was wine. I said, no, it is juice, and gave her my cup. My reading of this morning’s scripture convinces me that Jesus would have done the same. But there more to my story... When the juice trays were coming back up the center aisle, Andreas, a Catholic whose official church stance would not only forbid him from receiving communion in a Protestant church but also would forbid me from receiving communion in a Catholic church, Andreas stopped one of the servers, took another cup up juice and gave it to me. It was a sacred moment, a sacrament indeed.

What happened to me in the moment of theological panic is not at all unusual for human beings. King says later in his essay that “(f)rom time immemorial (people) have lived by the principal that ‘self-preservation is the first law of life.’” He goes on to say: “...this is a false assumption. I would say that other-preservation is the first law of life. It is the first law of life precisely because we cannot preserve self without being concerned about preserving other selves. The universe is so structured that things go awry if (people) are not diligent in their cultivation of the other-regarding dimension. ‘I’ cannot reach fulfillment without ‘thou.’ The self cannot be self without other selves. Self-concern without other concern is like a tributary that has no outward flow to the ocean.”

In Africa there is a concept of *ubuntu*, a sense that I cannot be MYself without you being YOURself. As we began worship this morning, we heard a Mayan greeting, *In Lekech*, that means something like “You are another myself. I am another yourself.” Last century AT&T said it succinctly: “We’re all connected.”

Who sits at your table? Who are your friends? Who are your co-workers? Who are the folks with whom you share time and energy for the health of the civic community? (Pause)

It occurred to me somewhere in my thinking about this meditation that we get to the World House, we come authentically to the world communion table, the same way we get to Carnegie Hall.... practice, practice, practice. Some of that practice happens around the real tables of our homes in terms of regularly inviting in people to share dinner who are not just our family – not just familiar, but who will bring new ideas, new ways of looking at the world and will refresh us with their perspectives. Some of that practice happens at the decision making tables in our work places and in our community life, places where we make sure all people are invited, included and intentionally seated around the table, places where we make sure once they are at table with us that their voices are heard.

Some of it is simply the way we come at life, the attitude with which we move around in the world. Practicing the World House Vision might include a spiritual discipline called “Benevolent Glancing” or “Seeing with Peaceful Eyes.” I recommend it to you. It can be done in any public place, anywhere there are people – the mall, a park, at school, a sports events, an airport, I do it as I walk the halls at Sinclair as part of my prayer for students, staff, faculty and administrators.

Tune your inner awareness to the people you are with – focus your attention on them rather than the next thing you are doing or the next place you are going or what needs to be done at home or at work. Find that loving place inside you, the heart space where you receive God’s love and can share it. Then without any outward shift in expression, look lovingly at the people you are passing in the corridor. Surround the person sitting next to you or across the meeting room with peaceful thoughts. Quietly bless those whose names you do not know, those whose hopes and dreams for fullness of life may be the same as yours, those whose political perspectives may differ from yours. And perhaps, smile.

Mother Teresa was once asked if there were one thing an ordinary individual could do to change the world. She said: “Smile at one another.” Smile at one another... it is a way of inviting a stranger to sit at table in the World House, in what Jesus called the Kingdom of God, in what I often call the Authentic Community of God.

Songwriters Richard Avery and Donald Marsh also offer instruction in inviting people to your table. In one of their songs, they recommend that we “read the morning headlines with a prayer.” At dinner, my partner Jim and I write names of people and places in a small book. We include many of the folks we read about in the morning headlines in our evening prayer, bringing the concerns of our local community and the wider world to our table.

Every day we choose either to operate out of the World House Vision or the Tree House Syndrome.

Who sits at your table? With whom do you share bread and drink from a cup? With whom do you share God’s love and life, justice and joy, hope and peace? (pause)

I have one more world communion story. I wasn't there and it didn't happen at a table – but it was a sacred moment, a sacrament, a communion. It was across the world where Bruce and Lora Whearty served as mission co-workers in an African village on the edge of the ocean. A huge storm came. Bruce and Lora shuttered themselves in their small house to wait out the storm. After the storm, they went out into the village to check on their friends. They found them all in the church singing hymns. Bruce later went walking to check on another village. He met three children on the way. They had been picking up windfall fruit to bring home. The storm destroyed all the village crops so this was important work. The children offered Bruce some fruit. Bruce, the adult, the white man, the Westerner, felt uncomfortable. He asked the children if their parents would approve of their giving him some of the precious fruit, especially since the storm had destroyed the gardens. The children told him, yes, oh yes, their parents would want them to share. Sharing is good, especially when there isn't very much.

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We have come through an economic storm recently. For many in our community, in our country, there is significant economic hardship. Because “all inhabitants of the globe are now neighbors,” that hardship is felt around the world. When there is a feeling of “not enough,” the Tree House Syndrome is tempting. It is easier to opt for self protection. We have a tendency to risk less, to cling to the familiar, to hunker down, to pull in, to tend to our own, to calculate carefully what we can give away in time, energy, and resources. On this World Communion Sunday, children a world away call us back to a different vision, an *ubuntu* vision, a World House vision. (pause)

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