

Weave Us Together

Psalm 139

Crossroads Christian Church

1 Corinthians 12:4-20

10th Anniversary Celebration\

World Communion Sunday (off lectionary)

Michael E. Dixon

Happy birthday, church. Usually, preachers say that in May or June, when Pentecost comes, because that marks the day that the church fully came alive with the gift of God's Spirit. But churches have many birthdays. You could also count 1888, when a group of Disciples met in Mrs. Mary Daniels' home in East St. Louis to form First Christian Church of East St. Louis. Or 1956 when that church decided to plant a new congregation in Belleville, called Hillcrest Christian Church, or 1958, when their building was built, or 1970, when this building was built, or 2003 when these two sister congregations came together into a new being, Crossroads Christian Church. And, of course, that's the birthday that we celebrate today.

Just for fun, let's take an unscientific poll. If, before you were a member at Crossroads you were a member of First Church, please raise your hands. If, before you were a member at Crossroads you were a member of Hillcrest, please raise your hands. Now, if you've joined Crossroads since the merger, please raise your hands. See? We're a people woven together from different backgrounds, but we've come to be something new in the weaving.

In my month here, I've heard some of the stories told by members of each of the congregations that came together to form Crossroads, about growing up in one congregation or the other, and about working together to create the new church. Under Doug Cripe's leadership, you discovered that it was a lot of work to bring two congregations together—both a lot of organizational work, and a lot of physical work, in combining the two church's stuff. And a lot of emotional work went into it, too. Each congregation had to give up some things; each congregation had to work hard to learn new names; and there is always grief when you sell a building full of memories, like Hillcrest did, or just in changing patterns of relationships, like both congregations did.

Crossroads was a joyous new birth, but you experienced something of labor pains in bringing that new birth about. St. Paul used that analogy in talking about how the whole world was being created anew in Jesus Christ. He said, in Romans 8:22-25, "We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now; and it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience."

It's fitting, I think, that we use the metaphor of birthday, and giving birth, to describe the creation of a new faith community out two older ones. Because the church, be it this congregation, SEGA, the Disciples, or the church universal, is less an organization than it is an organism. It's a living body, and St Paul, again, dared to describe it as the body of Christ. We're used to hearing that, but it's really a bold and daring metaphor. When Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians, including the excerpt that we heard from 1 Corinthians 12 as our New Testament lesson this morning, he was writing to a fractious, fighting, and fragmented church. There were almost as many different opinions as there were members. Some Corinthians idolized their own mentors in faith and put down other leaders in the church. Some Corinthians thought that since Christ saved us from the law, they could do anything they pleased, immoral or not. Some wealthier, more powerful Corinthians had a banquet while celebrating the Lord's Supper, and left only crumbs for their poorer, weaker brothers and sisters to eat later. Some Corinthians thought that their own spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues, were signs that they had God's special favor. They all had their own little in-groups, but they put them ahead of the church as a whole.

So Paul came up with this really audacious metaphor. Since Jesus Christ had ascended into heaven, the church was now Christ's body on earth. That meant that the church is more than an organization, it is an organism. The church is more than a collection of like-minded people, it is covenanted with God to do Christ's work. The church is more than a 401k non-profit, it was

the body that Christ uses to get things done. If the church is the body of Christ on earth, then it must be about doing what Christ did when he physically walked the earth. We must be about bringing healing where people are suffering; bringing peace where people are in conflict; bringing forgiveness where people are immobilized by sin and guilt; bringing reconciliation where people are estranged; bringing redemption to where people are in bondage; and bringing the love of God where lives are empty and turned in on themselves. In short, the church is called to be the community that increases the love of God and the love of neighbor.

Our Psalm for the day, Psalm 139, talks also about how close God is to us, whether we want God close or not! God knows more about us than we know about ourselves. And here comes this weaving/knitting metaphor again, that God knits us together in our mother's wombs.

So we, as Crossroads Christian Church, are a community woven together by the love of God. As a merged church, being woven together is more of a visible reality than it might be if we had stayed two separate congregations; but it's still real for all congregations, that they are woven together as a community living in a covenant relationship with a loving God.

Today, besides being our 10th anniversary as Crossroads Christian Church, is World Communion Sunday. You might have guessed that is why I'm wearing this colorful tunic, and I'll tell you more about that later in the communion meditation. World Communion Sunday was begun by the Presbyterians back in the early 1930s, when the dark clouds of war and dictatorship were spreading across Europe and the rest of the world. It was designed as a day to celebrate the worldwide ecumenical church, as a way to celebrate our unity in Christ amid all the disunity in the world. A Disciple, Jesse Bader, was a leader in getting it popular through the Federal Council of Churches (now the National Council), and through churches worldwide.

It's wonderful to look at the table in front of us, and to remember that Christians are gathering at tables and altars all around the world, in great cities and in open country, in steamy

jungles and frozen tundra, in refugee camps and towns like ours. The bread is broken, the cup is poured, in hundreds of different languages, by people of all races and countless ethnicities. Jesus Christ is being remembered and honored in both the Americas, in Europe and Asia, in Africa and Australia, and on islands scattered in between.

Jan Richardson, a Christian artist and poet, wrote this poem that I want to share with you.

And the Table Will Be Wide

A Blessing for World Communion Sunday

By Jan Richardson

And the table
will be wide.

And the welcome
will be wide.

And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.

And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.

And we will come
as children who trust

there is enough.
And we will come
unhindered and free.
And our aching
will be met
with bread.
And our sorrow
will be met
with wine.

And we will open our hands
to the feast
without shame.
And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.
And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.
And we will taste
and know
of delight.

And we will become bread

for a hungry world.
And we will become drink
for those who thirst.
And the blessed
will become the blessing.
And everywhere
will be the feast. ⁱ

Today, on World Communion Sunday, a day when Christians of many churches around the world look beyond the differences that divide us—doctrine, biblical interpretation, church organization, tradition, old wounds from past battles, race, language, culture, nationality, and make a common witness that here—right here—what unites us is more important than what divides us. We have to take the divisions in the body of Christ seriously, and learn to listen to one another in all our differences. But here at this table today we can be prophetic—we can make a faith claim. This isn't our table, it is Christ's. And here we find strength, hope, and new life, just like the rest of God's children. Amen.

Prayer (Thom Schuman, adap.)

O God of all people, O God of all worlds,

We will not find that needed justice in our apathy;

we will not find that elusive wholeness with our quarreling;

we will not find our hoped for unity with our doctrines;

we will not find our misplaced love with our hating;

we will not find that rest we crave in our overflowing planners;

we will not find the peace you offer in our well nursed grudges.

but

we will find you, on this World Communion Sunday, in the brokenness of the Bread and in the breaking of our hearts;

we will find you when we drain the Cup, refill it with our gifts, and offer it to a little child;

we will find you when we squeeze closer together,

making room at the Table for all your people.

We will find you as we pray for others. Hear, us, O God, as we remember.....

Communion: The tunic that I'm wearing today was a gift from a group of refugees from Burma whom I got to know. They had journeyed to St Louis and had become members of Second Baptist Church, the congregation that I served a couple of years back. This group of refugees, part of an ethnic group called the Karen, were wonderful people, and I enjoyed getting to know them and working with them. They are poor, but generous and very family oriented, and are devoted to their children. And they are members of a Christian community that goes back many years. Their ancestors were among the first in Asia to respond to Christian missionaries, way back in the early 1800s. I'm wearing the tunic today just to help us visualize that Christ's body does reach around the world, and that American Christians, Asian Christians, African or Latin American or European Christians are all part of Christ's body, and that Christ's body was broken, Christ's blood was shed, for all of us—not us and them, but all of us. Amen.

¹ Jan Richardson, The Painted Prayerbook blog, paintedprayerbook.com