

WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

The World is Our Parish

Romans 10: 5-13

Matthew 28: 16-19

Sermon preached at Foundry United Methodist

On Sunday, October 6, 2002

By Rev. Dean Snyder

Part of the function of religion is to provide a sense of safety, security and trust in the midst of a world that often seems arbitrary, uncontrollable, and dangerous. This is why religious groups tend to be homogenous. It is easier to feel safe when you are with your own family, your own tribe, your own nationality, your own race, your own party, your own kind -- people who look like you, people who think the way you think, people who behave the way you behave.

Because part of what religion does for us to help us feel safe in an unsafe and unpredictable world, religious groups often tend toward unanimity of family, race, class or culture. You want to go to worship where you don't have to watch your back.

The earliest religions were family-based – altars in our households where we worship our ancestors. Blood religion.

Then emerged tribal religions, where we were all part of the same extended family. Then national religions where we were all part of the same people.

This is the history of biblical religion – it began as a family religion, then the tribe of Abraham, then the 12 tribes of the nation Israel, and then an amazing thing happened in the time of Jeremiah. The nation was destroyed, but Judaism survived as it was scattered all over the face of the earth in Diaspora.

Then another amazing thing happened. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his Jewish followers learned to give up the safety and security of basing religion on any human bond – not family, nation, gender or race --and the church was born.

The punch line of the gospel of Matthew is this: Jesus instructs his disciples to make disciples of all nations – to leave behind all religion of blood and class and language – and to make disciples of all nations, baptizing people of all nations into one new community inclusive of all peoples with no one to watch their back.

Church isn't supposed to be a safe place because we are all alike here. Church is supposed to transcend all the cocoons we make to give ourselves a sense of security and coziness.

We regress from this all the time. An embarrassing percentage of United Methodist congregations, as I learned working on conference staff, are family chapels run by members of one or two intermarried families. Some of our churches are based on nationality, culture, race or language. We have German churches, and black churches, and European churches, and Hispanic churches, and immigrant churches, and gay churches, and liberal churches, and conservative churches and charismatic churches.

I know the reasons. Some such churches are the result of the prejudice, racism and homophobia of denominations. There are reasons why oppressed people, especially, have sometimes needed to segregate themselves into separate congregations. I don't doubt that God tolerates some of this.

But it is not Christ's way. Christ's church is not limited by nationality or philosophy or geography. It is not a safe place. Christ's disciples include all nations. Christ's church is a global church.

Here's the deal the resurrected Christ makes with his disciples: Give up the safety of family-based religion, nationality based religion, geography based religion - become a church of all nations - burst the cocoon that religion can too easily be - and look to me for your sense of security and safety, because, Jesus

says, I will be with you.

It is a natural and human thing for people to want to gather in safe places to pray, but it is not Jesus' way. To really know Jesus' presence, we must leave behind the safety of our upper rooms and sanctuaries and familiar turf, and go into all the world creating communities where natural enemies are baptized into one spiritual family. When we do Jesus will be with us, even to the end of the age.