

I'd had a request a few weeks ago to work the hymn, "Just As I Am," into our worship. I thought it was a good match this morning because it reflects the humble attitude of the lepers seeking healing. Humility was also on my mind due to our celebration of World Communion Sunday. We cannot truly enter into the spirit of this great modern celebration of the Christian community unless we are ready to be humble about our own place in that community, ready to say that we don't have all the answers, ready to learn from our brothers and sisters around the world and from different traditions. Truly, we hear God's voice speak to us from a variety of sources, some that may be surprising. Once we let God's love break every barrier down, as the hymnist wrote, then we can hear God's voice from those unexpected sources clearly and learn better and better how to come to the Lamb of God with our whole selves.

I'd like to illustrate some ideas about the worldwide communion of the saints this morning with reference to my own journey towards ecumenism as well with the Scriptures. My journey may be similar to some of yours or very different but I hope you will indulge me in a little trip down memory lane.

Some of my very earliest memories are from my family's involvement at Skycrest Baptist Church in Clearwater, Florida. That church was an important part of our lives. I have memories of both mornings and evenings at Skycrest, so I suspect that in those days, as we were later, we were of that class of good Baptist folk who showed up whenever the doors were open. I also remember going to church with my grandparents when we would make the trip north to visit them, at First Baptist Church of Herculaneum, Missouri, with my Grandma Boyer, and at New Bethel General Baptist Church outside Bald Knob, Arkansas, with my mother's parents. There was, as you will perceive, a certain Baptist homogeneity to my early experience. My best friend back in those Clearwater days was a little chap with the eminently Southern name of Jeff Davis. I remember it concerned me that Jeff and his family did not attend Skycrest. I don't remember if that was the result of the natural exclusivity of a child's sense of rightness or if I'd already been exposed to a more formal sense of Baptist exclusivity. I certainly picked up some strain of that dubious theology at some point in my childhood. In my preschool consideration of the world, though, there was clearly a "right way" to worship and relate to God and it was solely contained in the mid-20th century conservative evangelical practices common to Southern Baptists.

So it was a bit of a shock to my system when we moved to England the summer before I was six. The worship practices I encountered at Maidstone Baptist Church were very different from what I was used to. But the things they taught children in Sunday School, the basic Bible stories, the love of God and Jesus for all of us, those seemed familiar. That no doubt helped me find a comfort level in the Church of England schools I attended for three years, where a minimal level of religious instruction and worship were a regular occurrence. It was my first non-Baptist worship experience, although I doubt that I was aware of it at the time, English Baptist and C of E practices being both so foreign to me and so similar to each other. I accepted the differences because we were so far from home and if one was OK, the other must be as well.

After going from one brand of religious homogeneity to another, our next move, to Long Island, was an even bigger shock. Now there was a tremendous diversity of faith and practice in our neighborhood and in my public school. We were the only Baptists, surrounded by Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics and Jews. On looking back, I think our little Southern Baptist mission

church, in many ways a tremendous, loving family of faith, must have had a little bit of the fortress-under-siege mentality to it. There was certainly no hint of ecumenical activity in those days; indeed we were encouraged to take the Gospel (and its corollary, the Four Spiritual Laws) to those poor benighted Catholics, lest they be condemned for all eternity.

As I moved into my 'Tween years, though, and we moved to St. Louis, I began to be troubled by any Baptist claims of an exclusive hold on the truth or salvation. For one thing, I began to have religious discussions with friends from other denominations. One particular friend was Mark Rand, son of a professor at the Lutheran Concordia Seminary. The family moved away when Mark's dad was one of those professors caught up in the theological turmoil plaguing the Lutherans in the early '70s, but not before Mark had introduced me to a new rock opera called "Jesus Christ Superstar." Another chum was Eric Vogelsang, son of the pastor of the local congregation of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. These guys related to their faith in much the same way I did (although Mark went to something called "Confirmation Class," which seemed theologically dubious to me). I couldn't help but feel that we were on the same, or at least a similar, path. I was also blessed in those years to be a part of a Southern Baptist church with a progressive outlook. When I was in junior high, we had a series of classes in Training Union (the evening version of Sunday School, for those of you who don't know the lingo), that focused on learning about other denominations – not for the purpose of converting the "heathens" but of deepening our understanding of our own tradition and doctrines. I do remember though, a field trip to a service at the Christian Scientist's church that convinced me that they were just too different and too boring to be bothered with.

By the time I graduated from college, my transition from Baptist Exclusivist to Committed Ecumenical was complete. I never did find a Baptist church in Houston in those years that was both theologically comfortable and easy to get to (although I joined South Main Baptist, I didn't get there very often), and my primary spiritual mentors were a Jesuit priest and an Episcopalian – one of the first women ordained to the priesthood in the U.S. And, of course, I was engaged to a Catholic girl, although I think she can testify that my commitment to ecumenism had a way to go yet. In the years since, I've served on ecumenical volunteer bodies, including being convener of the South Snohomish County Ministerial Association this year, and been the executive director of an ecumenically-based social service agency, Interfaith Community Council of New Albany, Indiana. In fact, after my term at Interfaith, I had more pulpit time in non-Baptist churches than in my own denomination.

I've told this story this morning because it seems to me that my experience in some ways mirrors the general experience of the people of God – a dawning awareness, through the continual urging of God's Spirit, that our particular group is not the be all and end all of God's plan for humankind. As I look at the various Scriptures suggested in the lectionary, I see God's repeated calling to Israel to open their hearts to their neighbors. They are God's Chosen People but they do not have a monopoly on relationship with or blessings from the Creator. There seems to be an evolution in the understanding of Yahweh's universal presence and love sketched out in our Scriptures this morning. There are actually three options for Old Testament readings, two of which we did not read earlier. The first is from the first chapter of the Book of Ruth. I hope you all know the story. Left destitute in Moab by the death of her husband and her two sons, the Israelite Naomi tells her Moabite daughters-in-law that she intends to return to her homeland.

Ruth insists on going with her, proclaiming that she will even worship the strange God of Israel out of loyalty to Naomi. It was the thing to do in that culture, to worship the god of whatever land you found yourself in. Gods were assumed to travel only with their adherents and only within a certain geography. The foreign Ruth, having adopted Israel's God, became an acceptable, if somewhat unconventional, part of the story of Israel's great hero-king, David, for she was his great-grandmother.

It is one thing to accept a young refugee woman into one's family of faith as a convert. It is something quite different to accept the general of an army that has conquered Israel. But that is what the story of Naaman and the prophet Elisha found in the fifth chapter of II Kings seems to call for. Naaman, a general of Aram who has subjugated Israel to his king, develops a skin disease. A young slave girl he took captive during the campaign urges him to seek out Israel's great prophet for healing. When Naaman is healed through following Elisha's prescription of bathing in the Jordan, he declares his allegiance to Yahweh. He then makes a request that might seem odd to us. "Please let two mule-loads of earth be given to your servant; for your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the Lord." The concept of a geographically confined God is still prevalent. Naaman wants to take a little bit of Israel home with him so that he can successfully worship Israel's God.

That concept is part of the reason the later Jewish exiles to Babylon were so distraught at their fate, a story we'll pick up again next week. But the prophet Jeremiah, not normally remembered for delivering words of hope, has some for the exiles. "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." This is a radical idea indeed. Not only can God be present to his people in Babylon but he wants to bless the Babylonians along with his Chosen. God's presence is universal and so is God's love, regardless of place of birth, family, or even religion. There is no caveat here that the people are to pray for the Babylonians only if they convert, just that they are to pray for them.

If it was hard for the Judean exiles in Babylon to pray for the nation of their captivity, it was harder yet for their descendants to pray for their nearest neighbors and estranged cousins, the Samaritans. The bitterest disputes always seem to be among family or people who have so much in common that they let little things differentiate them from one another. Civil wars are the bloodiest and the longest lasting. I think of the "troubles" in Northern Ireland or the genocidal conflict between the Hutus and the Tutsis in Rwanda in the 1990s or the similar brutalities still happening in Darfur or the Congo. So was the unremitting hatred for the Jews and the Samaritans, whom the Jews considered a mongrel race of heretics. Both groups were children of Abraham, but the Samaritans sprang from the intermarriage of the pitiful remnant of the Northern Kingdom and the foreigners settled in the land by the Assyrians. Both groups worshipped the God of Abraham, but the Samaritans had their own holy mountain and their own temple, away from Jerusalem. That the Gospels should present individual Samaritans as exemplars of faith, both in the story of the leper that we heard this morning and in their retelling of Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, is astounding. To give any indication that the hated Samaritans are a part of God's Beloved Community is to turn the conventional pious wisdom of

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observant Jews on its ear. It is a short step, conceptually, from taking the Good News into Samaria to taking it to the ends of the earth and including the Gentiles, the Nations, all the peoples of the earth. But, of course, that has been God's plan all along. We can find it in God's promise to Abraham, in God's instructions to Moses, even in the devotion of the Psalms. But it's always easier to talk about how God loves everybody than to act as if we need to love everybody.

Now, I'm quite certain that I don't need to sell anyone here on the benefits of ecumenism, on the idea that it is honoring to God for us to stand in solidarity with Christians in other denominations. After all, many of us here this morning have deep roots in traditions other than that of American Baptists. Nor am I concerned about convincing anyone here this morning that the communion of saints, the Universal Church, the Beloved Community does indeed span our globe. We reach out in prayer and missions support to Christians all over the world. So why bother to trace my own journey into ecumenism? Why focus on Scriptures that encourage us to embrace those who seem different from us, those from different lands and with different faiths? The thing is, our human tendency to separate ourselves into groups and to name our group as the cream of the crop continues to sprout up despite our apparently enlightened outlook. Even when we reject the notion of racial superiority or religious purity, the world will continue to whisper into our ears that "they" are not to be trusted, that we must protect our group, stick to our own kind. It's an easy trap to fall into, as my generation was reminded by the prog rock group Pink Floyd in their song, "Us and Them": "Us and Them / And after all we're only ordinary men / Me, and you / God only knows it's not what we would choose to do." Wars continue, prejudices continue, fear and hatred of "the other" continue. Safiyah Fosua, Director of International Preaching for the United Methodist Church asks in her weekly web column, "Who are the lepers in your land? The new neighbors down the street who wear clothing that we choose to call "costumes"? People for whom English is a second language? One of the unfortunate things about human social behavior is our apparent "need" to create a class of untouchables."

As I've walked our city during my campaign, talking to our neighbors, I've heard people expressing concern about the plethora of non-English signs on storefronts in Lynnwood, or about neighbors who don't fit in because they don't understand American culture. It's a short step from there to outright xenophobia, fear of foreigners. The media has been buzzing in recent months over whether a Mormon could actually be elected President. A surprisingly high number of voters say they can't vote for Mitt Romney because of his faith. One of the few things about the ecumenical scene in this area that saddens me is that there are two active ministerial groups in South Snohomish County, one for liberals and one for conservatives and there is strong sentiment from some members of both groups that that is the way it should be. I wonder if some of those folk have recently read the epistle passage in this set of lectionary verses, II Timothy 2:8-15, which includes the elder apostle's warning to the young preacher that he avoid "wrangling over words," or unnecessarily divisive theological argument.

As we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper, our act of communion with Christians around the world as well as with Christ on this World Communion Sunday, I will read as is my custom from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. Following those words in his letter, Paul calls for Christians to examine themselves prior to joining in the ceremony of bread and cup. This morning, I would call for us to examine ourselves in light of Jesus' call to his disciples to offer

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the Good News of God's love to the whole world. Are there those for whom we do not wholeheartedly pray for good? Are there fears and hatreds of others that we need to confront? We are called to see the good in all and, as Jeremiah wrote, to seek the good of all, even those of Babylon. That is a timely word for us, whether we understand it to mean those in the city still called Babylon, or those whom we have placed in a metaphorical Babylon, those we think are too wicked or too different to be worthy of our prayers and good will. My brothers and sisters, we are one body with all those who follow Christ, however different our paths may be. And, in the sight of God, we are one with all Creation, that which God made and called very good. For our brothers and sisters in Christ, for all the peoples of the earth, for the good earth itself, thanks be to God.