

What Us Means
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
October 3, 2021 Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost,
World Communion Sunday
Psalms 8; Mark 9:38-41; John 10:14-16

Call to Worship: On World Communion Sunday we remember that when we say the word “us” it includes all God’s creation, so much diversity we can hardly imagine it, the staggering variety of forms of life that we are part of and one with, from great blue whales to bluebirds to blue-green algae, and even within our species and spiritual tradition, “us” includes Pacific Island sanctuaries with no walls and palm leaves for a roof, South American mountain cinderblock worship spaces buried in spring snow, breathtaking European cathedrals, Sinai desert monastery chapels, New England white clapboard churches on the common.

“Us” includes all cultures, colors, conditions and configurations. So it is good to hear voices from around the world today. We begin with a sentence of preparation from the Pacific Island of New Guinea.

Let us pray, “Gracious God, oil the hinges of our hearts’ doors that they may swing gently and easily to welcome your coming. Amen.”

Let us worship together...

Time with the Children: Good morning! A bright ten-year-old boy once asked me if animals go to heaven. His concern was that they might not be allowed because their brains are not as advanced as ours. He was growing up on a homestead that had cows and sheep and dogs and cats that he loved, so this felt urgent to him to know.

The question is really about the extent of God’s love and human oneness with the natural world, so let’s think about it, leaving aside the question of what heaven is. Do you have to be smart to get into heaven?

One of the sweetest, most loving people I know is a 65 year old woman whose brain never developed past early childhood. I would definitely want her to be in my heaven, and God is far more loving than any human can be, so I am sure God loves her and wants her to be in heaven, too. And how could a baby not be welcomed into heaven? That’s unthinkable.

The intelligence of the brain can't be an obstacle, but what about humans vs. other animals? The Psalm we will read today says that the works of God's hands include "All the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea." I don't think God would make something and then not love it, and I don't think God would love something and not want it in heaven.

That was how I answered the boy, and he was greatly relieved, but then I pushed him a little. I said, if God makes and loves all different kinds of people, and God makes and loves all the creatures of the earth, then shouldn't we love them all? Do you see that they are all US? We are each and every one of us just another beloved creature of God. We are diverse and we are one, because we have the same Spirit in us all.

On World Communion Sunday we think about how all the churches in the world are one. As different as we are, there is a certain spiritual practice that all churches do every week and every day. I wonder if you can guess... Pray! And we all pray the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, every church in its own language, with its own set of words. So as we pray it, let's think about all those other voices all over the world saying it this morning, too. Let us pray together the New Zealand Maori and Polynesian Version of the Lord's Prayer...

Sermon: *What Us Means*

What makes us us? What does the word us mean to God? What does the Spirit of the universe intend us to mean on earth or in our nation or in this church?

These are theoretical questions, but they have very practical implications. The answers we come up with will determine how we treat one another. How we treat one another will determine what kind of world or church we will be.

Jesus said that the two great commandments are to love God with all our heart, mind soul and strength, and to love our neighbor as our self. People asked him who is our neighbor—who is one of us? He answered by telling the story of the Good Samaritan, a man who treated his bleeding, naked, legally impure and untouchable enemy as a neighbor and touched him with healing love at great personal risk and cost. In other words, the last person you would ever want or think of as one of us is, in fact, one of us.

The Psalm says that out of the mouths of babes and infants comes truth that will silence all the enemies of God's creation. Infants arrive in this world with a need to feel one with their

caretakers. The longing for a united world, a peaceable realm that provides safety and sufficiency, is programmed into our soul. We hear it in the oldest scriptures and the newest baby's cry.

If humans share this collective longing for oneness, if it is what we want and what God wants and what all creation wants, why do we get entrenched in divisions?

The short answer is that humans have a vision problem. We need to adjust our vision—we need to evolve our consciousness to be like the heart and mind of Christ. If we can see differently, we will act differently.

The Psalm tries to get us to develop a God's-eye perspective on life, lifting our vision to look down from the heavens. Astronauts who look back on earth from space confirm that it completely changes their perspective.

Frank Borman of Apollo 8 said, "When you're finally up at the moon looking back on earth, all those differences and nationalistic traits are pretty well going to blend, and you're going to get a concept that maybe this really is one world and why...can't we learn to live together like decent people." (December 23, 1968 Newsweek)

Sultan bin Salman Al-Saud was a member of a Space Shuttle crew and the first Arab and Muslim in space. He said, "The first day or so we all pointed to our countries. The third or fourth day we were pointing to our continents. By the fifth day, we were aware of only one Earth."

Three thousand years before those space missions the Psalmist saw from a similar perspective. The heavens are so huge, the earth so small and humans tinier still, and yet the Psalmist saw that God loves and cares for us all, and gives us the responsibility as God's stewards to care for and unify the earth and its creatures.

Jesus had a similar vision of oneness and universal love. He spoke in the gospel of John as the good shepherd, saying "I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also.... So there will be one flock, one shepherd."

In the Gospel of Mark, John and the other disciples try to stop a man from doing healings in Christ's name because the man is not following "us." But Jesus defines us differently. Whoever is not against us is for us, whoever does the slightest act of kindness toward us is rewarded as being part of us.

The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner coined the phrase “anonymous Christianity,” and it has become accepted church doctrine. Even people who reject Christ can be part of us if they love and act like Christ.

C. S. Lewis has a beautiful image for this in his Narnia book, *The Last Battle*, the book I talked about last Sunday. At the end of Narnia’s world, all creatures are invited to come through a stable door into Aslan’s country, or God’s realm of love and life and light. Some say no and veer into darkness, but among those who find their way in is an enemy who worshipped another god and believed that the Christ-like Aslan was evil.

The enemy asks why he is allowed to be there and Aslan explains that every time he did an act of lovingkindness for his god, it counted as being done for Aslan.

We make ourselves part of Christ’s us by loving and acting like Christ. We may veer off into the darkness of separation and division, but God does not close the door on us. Differences can be reconciled. Love can unite people who take different paths. We can still be us though we dwell apart.

Jesus said, “Do not judge.” He said to forgive seventy times seven times. He said to love our enemies. His whole way is designed to make us see that us includes everyone, and to help us learn how to live as one. That needs to be the place from which we start in our relationships. It never is a matter of someone proving that they are one of us—they are one of us. The question is whether they and we will act that way—whether we will negotiate our differences or make them divide us.

Think about how a church would act and feel that started with the premise that we are one. Every new person who came through the door would be greeted as a long lost friend. Every time we had a difference of opinion or a conflict, we would treat one another as a part of us, with love, with respect, with a desire to find common ground, with appreciation that we all want the same thing ultimately, to follow Christ’s way of love and do works of love in the world. (The restorative justice circles that we have used for conversations about complex issues are models of this.)

Every time one of us did the smallest kindness for someone, we would be filled with gratitude and joy, knowing that it was not that person acting alone, but on behalf of us all in the

service of God's love, and not just us in our congregation but in solidarity with all loving people and creatures everywhere.

That is the us Jesus is calling us to be, and it is an us that together can transform the world into the realm of God on earth.

That us is what it means when we share the bread and juice on World Communion Sunday, but we do not need a shared ritual to make us one. We need only shared vision and shared commitment. Covid is keeping us from the bread and juice again today, but in many ways our communion has been even stronger and more loving and joyful in the past year and a half. We have celebrated every week, expressing our gratitude for the mutual care and support of this loving community that is helping us get through an extremely hard time.

I wish we were sharing the ritual, but the lived communion is what the ritual is all about, so let us pray in silence feeling the oneness among us that World Communion Sunday represents, and letting that gratitude, love and joy for one another fill our hearts...

Haiku by Herbert Goertz:

Yellow maple leaves
dance on the wings of the wind
yet they are falling