

No East or West

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

October 16, 2022 Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, World Communion Sunday

Psalms 104; Acts 17:26-30; Galatians 3:28; Timothy 4:1b-5; John 17:20-23

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost and World Communion Sunday. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

Many of the greatest spiritual teachers including Jesus attained a level of maturity where they could see the oneness of all people and all the earth. They tried urgently to get people to grow into that same vision, knowing that the Golden Rule and loving our neighbor as our self can become the way people live only at that level of spiritual being.

As Gus Speth has said, this spiritual awakening is our one hope for making the changes needed to heal the harm humanity has caused.

World Communion Sunday is about oneness not only in the sacrament of communion but even more in the practice of seeing and living oneness, so let us be one today, both in person and on Zoom, extending our loving care especially to those we do not know or do not know well, so that all feel included in this one family.

Call to Worship: Christ prayed that we would be one, and recognize the fact that we already are one. The poetry of the King James Version of the Bible puts it this way: “God made of one blood all the nations of earth.”

Science confirms that we are all made of the same stardust, evolved out of the same single cell beings, descended from one common ancestor. We sail through the vast universe on this small blue home we all share, an unreachable distance from any other livable planet.

We are truly one, but our world is divided today in ways that are causing terrible suffering. As Bill Coffin, often said, including from this pulpit, “All human beings have more in common than they have in conflict, and it is precisely when what they have in conflict seems over-riding that what they have in common needs most to be affirmed.”

Let us worship together opening our hearts and minds to the Spirit that makes us one, affirming that Spirit’s presence in everyone and everything on earth...

Children's Time: Often on World Communion Sunday we say a beautiful Native American prayer from the Ojibway people. It goes like this:

“Grandfather, look at our brokenness. We know that in all creation only the human family has strayed from the Sacred Way. We know that we are the ones who are divided, and we are the ones who must come back together to walk in the Sacred Way. Grandfather, Sacred One, teach us love, compassion and honor that we may heal the earth and heal each other...”

That prayer talks about humanity as if we are always broken, lost and divided, but the fact is that even though at any given moment some people have strayed from love, compassion and honor, other people are busy loving and feeling compassion and honoring and healing the earth and all life on it. Each of us can sometimes stray and sometimes come back to that sacred way of being—we are not all lost or broken all the time.

And yet the prayer is true in that the human family taken together as a whole right now is divided, and our impact on the earth is harmful because we have too often failed to love the earth and all other people and creatures, failed to have compassion for them and honor them, and that has led us into big trouble.

But there is hope. The prayer addresses a great spirit it calls grandfather, a name for the spirit that sparked life on earth and established life's sacred way. The prayer asks that spirit to teach us and help us so that we may heal what we have harmed.

There's another hope implied by that, which is that humans actually can learn from the Spirit and change and be healed. Spiritual wisdom says that we each have different levels of being, our best or most mature self and our worst, least mature self, and lots of levels in between.

The church exists to help us learn how to live as our best self as much of the time as possible and the more of us who do that, the more loving the human family will be toward the earth and each other.

There is something we can do that can help us be our best in any situation any minute of the day... Prayer turns our feet back to the sacred way every single time, especially when our prayer humbly asks for guidance and help.

Let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

No East or West

Vladimir Putin rages against the world order of the West, calling it a racist colonizer that is guilty of centuries of military actions for economic gain. He says that our “repression of freedom is taking on the outlines of a reverse religion, of real Satanism,” and he blasts Western values, including liberal views on gender identity, as a “denial of man.”

His critique is long and detailed and to some extent it is true. The West has done awful things. At our congregation’s Annual Meeting last month we voted to create a fund to make reparations for what Europeans have done here to Native Americans. It is important to acknowledge that the West continues to do terrible things to the earth and to humans.

But it is absurd to justify perpetrating an atrocity by saying that others have perpetrated atrocities. Atrocities are inherently unjustifiable, and to excuse them by precedent sentences us to a spiral of violence that started before the dawn of history and that can end only in the annihilation of all humanity and life on earth.

The fact is, the East has its share of guilt, too. It is ridiculous of the leader of the nation who brought us Stalin and the Soviet Union to talk about the West as if only it had blood on its hands.

A Russian who had been imprisoned in the Soviet Gulag, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, wrote, “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties—but right through every human heart—and then through all human hearts.... And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains...an un-uprooted small corner of evil.” (*The Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, pp 615f)

At the end of this sermon we will sing the hymn “In Christ there is no east or west.” It was written as rebuke to Rudyard Kipling’s famous line, “Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.” The hymn stands against the kind of Western racist colonizing and economic exploitation that Kipling’s British Empire was carrying out when the hymn was written.

The truth is that all societies are a mix, just as all people are. Russia gave us Stalin but also Tolstoy who was one of the greatest influences on Gandhi’s principles of nonviolence. Many early American churches were guilty of promoting cultural genocide and displacing Native

Americans, but in the 1760s the Quaker John Woolman visited frontier native villages to listen and understand them and then organized support for Native American rights.

In Christ, or in the Sacred Way, there is no east or west, there are just people who can be at their best or at their worst and usually somewhere in between. As Bill Coffin says, “No human being’s identity is exhausted by his or her gender, race, ethnic origin, national loyalty, or sexual orientation.” Beyond that diversity there is a oneness at our core, in our goodness and in our flaws.

Today we heard many passages affirming our oneness. Psalm 104 says, “O God how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.”

Paul says that all the nations and people of earth are made by God from one blood, and “In God we live and move and have our being.” Paul wrote, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Jesus prays “that they may all be one.”

How can we not recognize that all the earth and all living beings are sacred and worthy of love, compassion and honor? How can we ever think that another set of people is excluded from that oneness and worthy of being oppressed or bombed?

The answer is in the passage we heard from the first letter to Timothy: “people will...suit their own desires, and will turn away from listening to the truth.”

Oneness is possible only at a level of being that can master the ego’s selfish desires and open to a wider, deeper, higher spiritual truth. We can live in oneness and in the sacred way when we put on the heart and mind of Christ, when we are our best, truest, most loving self. When we slip from that state of being, we slip out of the sacred way into a condition of being divided.

It’s easy to slip, which is why Jesus tells us to forgive one another seventy times seven times, an infinite number, and why he says, “Do not judge,” and why his central calling to all people is to undergo kenosis and metanoia, meaning self-emptying and the expansion of our heart to a new level. As Paul said, God needs us all to undergo this personal transformation now.

But we all slip, even Vladimir Putin, and when we do we are all capable of harmful thoughts and actions. We need to forgive and have love and compassion for one another and for

ourselves when we slip, even as we actively oppose the harm that is being done. And, of course, as soon as we forgive, love and have compassion, we are back on the sacred way, back being our best, truest, Christ-like self.

A congregation that strives to be at that forgiving, loving, compassionate level of being will do things like make reparations to Native Americans and explore how it can be more open to and affirming of people who have traditionally been shut out or oppressed by the church and society. Such a congregation will also welcome every person who comes through its doors with unconditional love and compassion and care, loving our neighbor as our self, knowing the truth that Jesus taught that everyone is our neighbor, that there is no stranger or enemy who is not one with us long before we meet.

A congregation that lives that way changes the world just by being a small outpost of God's realm of love and oneness on earth. That's what we are doing here with every loving thing we do, planting a tiny seed, having no idea how far it's branches will reach.

You are blessed and a blessing, and I am so grateful to be a part of this beloved community and to be back after two months away. Thank you for all you are and all you do!

Let us pray in silence...

Haiku by Herbert A. Goertz:

A shower of leaves
welcomes me as I set out
on my morning walk.