

Guiding Not Grasping
Philippians 2.1-13
October 1, 2017
World Communion Sunday
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I often find World Communion Sunday to be a playful day in which we honor the differences and oneness of all those around the world who are walking the Jesus path. Sometimes we read and pray and sing in different languages. We come to the communion meal expecting the usual wafers or white bread only to discover we are experiencing this ritual together with naan and tortillas and brioche. However, as I have thought about our world community in preparing for this morning's worship, I have felt a little less playful. Today as we open our minds to consider how brothers and sisters around the globe are encountering this same meal either in the day already passed, this very moment with us, or in the day yet to come, we are met by flags on the table before us.

Now normally I am not a "flag in the sanctuary" kind of Pastor. When I lived in Virginia, a seminary classmate was traveling rural Virginia for pulpit supply and happened to arrive at a little Baptist church on either Memorial Day or the 4th of July. And on that particular Sunday, the communion table was draped in a large American flag serving as a table cloth with the elements of common on top of it. I hope your reaction was as visceral as mine in recognizing it is wildly inappropriate and even dangerous to conflate those two stories in sacred space at a sacred meal. Treading lightly, the presence of flags today is to remind us all that in this meal, we are connected across borders and time zones and hemispheres. We are connected in mysterious, unexpected ways to the family of God. The flags today are visual reminders of people in every one of these countries who are mindfully on the way of Christ. And regardless of their beliefs or knowledge of Jesus, every person in every one of these countries is made in the image of God.

World Communion Sunday has its origins in war time of the 1930s and 1940s for the purpose of reminding and connecting people of faith to the truth that we are human family in the kingdom of God. The day invites us to ignore the arbitrary borders of the nations of our homes and see one another as part of the same story. That's hard enough to do with the neighbor who is a morning person and insists on using his leaf blower every Saturday at 6 a.m. That's hard enough to do with family who disappoints us and fails to meet our hopes and expectations. That's hard enough to do here in this room where we pretty much like each other a whole lot. It is even harder to release the narrative of our separateness

and embrace the guiding story that we are connected to every created one and every created thing by the love of God.

Today at the communion table, as you come forward to receive the body of Christ broken for you and the blood of Christ shed for you, you will see the flags of Puerto Rico and Mexico—nations reeling from the tremendous grief and devastation of natural disasters; Puerto Rico still drowning in water and crying out for help the way New Orleans was just 12 years ago. You will see the flags of Iraq and Afghanistan, nations in which an entire generation has been raised knowing only of occupation and war with our own. At the same time, Afghanistan is reported to have the second fastest growing Christian community in the world. You will also see the flag of the country in which Christian community is expanding the most across the entire globe—Iran.

You will see the flags of Syria, Russia, China, Cuba, and North Korea. What other flags could we add? So many. Are we global neighbors? Are we enemies? Are we brothers and sisters made by the same loving, creative God, called to partner in the Divine work of peace and love and healing justice? Before the partition of Korea, Catholic and Protestant missionaries were committed to the people of that nation. In my lifetime, Catholic and Protestant churches have opened in Pyongyang. Korean Bibles have been passed throughout the country despite North Korea's present-day record as the harshest persecutors of Christianity. So not only are all of the people of that country human beings made in the image of God and breathed into being from God's very heart and imagination, many continue to follow the Way of Jesus even though there are tremendous consequences before them. A 2016 report by British group Aid to the Church in Need estimated "some 50,000 Christians may currently be in [North Korean] penal camps" for practicing their faith.¹

Each of these countries represented is in our headlines right now, and that means we think of a specific story when we hear each name. When I say Afghanistan. Syria. Puerto Rico. Iran. North Korea. We immediately go to the narrative we know whether it's of great suffering and wondering how we can intervene, great suffering and how our nation has played a role in that suffering, or fear and terror of what happens when world leaders are utterly disinterested in diplomacy, compulsively addicted to power, and are not committed at any level to being makers of peace. Our first thought is rarely the ways we are united and connected as humans and as people of faith.

Yes, I find it nearly impossible to not wax political from the pulpit these days, because we are in such tremendously fragile and complicated times. There is simply no genuine way to

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/doug-bandow/north-korea-the-worlds-wo_b_12969994.html

gather and say, "Love God, love each other, go in peace," and then not expect us all to actually go do something about it. To love God and love each other and go in peace is a benediction that requires us to live in a very particular way: caring for one another AND the common good. When we speak of these global stories, whether tales of natural disaster or war or rumors of war, we must speak and listen first as people who are following on the Way of Jesus. We are living out our faith here in this geographical location of New Orleans, Louisiana, United States, either because this is the country in which we were born or because this is the country we now call home. But we must view the humanity of the world through a Christian lens before all other lenses for this is our guiding story.

The early church was asking some questions, too, about who told the true guiding story of their lives. In every culture in every time, there are competing stories for shaping our lives. For the church at Philippi, would it be the old stories passed to them through Rome? Or the modern narratives from Greek culture? Would it be the legacy of ancient Judaism? Or was the way of Truth also the way of enforceable power as the political culture around them showed? They did not agree on what their guiding story should be, and there were certainly critics all around offering them a different way of engaging the world or altogether threatening the way the small church was living and moving and having their being.

So in this letter, the Apostle Paul speaks into their questions with the reminder that they are to FIRST live according to the gospel of Christ, standing firm in one Spirit, and remembering that true salvation comes from God. To know your story as a follower of Christ requires you know what God is like, and so Paul uses the words of an ancient hymn to remind them they already know how that story goes. If you want to know what God is like, then you must look to Jesus the Christ who was not grasping for power or grasping for authority. No, Jesus did not regard himself as better than others. He didn't grasp for equality with God and certainly didn't exploit his role in the Divine story of humanity. He looked to the interest of others. He emptied himself, made himself less, gladly took on the role of a servant, even when it meant death by horrible, cruel, state execution. He walked toward that death and not away. He gave himself in love and did not retaliate with weapons and war and rumors of war. The story of the love of God as fully revealed in Jesus the Christ is the story guiding us today.

This self-emptying Christ in Philippians 2.7 is central to our story. If you've studied this letter much, if you were in my Spring Bible Study this year, or if you have read much about the underpinnings of Centering Prayer, then you have come across the Greek word *kensosis* used here describing the non-grasping, self-emptying Jesus. The story we tell over and over again each week is not of a God who is a tyrant or a dominating ruler. The story we tell is of a God so deeply connected to humanity that the picture for God is Jesus, walking away from power into weakness, loving the world into the abundant peace of God

through meals and healing and teaching and the slowness of a walk and the wildness of a boat ride. The unfolding of the life of Christ is our window into the heart of God, not a story of abuse and power and domination but of persistent love and invitation. The story that shapes our life matters. It is critical that we listen to Paul and order ourselves around the same story if we are to be a unified community living out the Jesus Way together. Our guiding story is *kenotic*—self-emptying; not grasping for power, but gently guiding in love and even taking the form of a servant.

If I cannot help from stepping into the news stories of the day and walking the line of the political again and again, I think that's because the church in America has come so far from this kenotic Christ. We have in prominent, "big pulpit" churches the talking head pastors who go on network news programs to say things like: God has given the President of the United States the authority to annihilate North Korea.² And believe me, the story that gets told again and again in our country of "what the church is saying" is not what small microphone pastors like me are saying. The voice of the Church becomes the one with the big microphone in front of it, and that voice is not being guided by the self-emptying, non-grasping God in human form who did not exploit his role but put the interest of others first. It's simply not the story the Church in America is known for anymore, even if we in here are really committed to that story. And I am committed to drawing us back to the guiding story of Christ.

"In a world of self-preservation, self-promotion, and just plain selfishness, we might [all] be perplexed by the words of Phil 2:5-11. With so many people striving for power they do not deserve, why would Christ surrender his right," Rev. Rob Fringer asks of the text.³ And what in the world does it look like for us to follow this guiding story? We start right at this table and recommit ourselves to the guiding story of Jesus the Christ, who did not grasp for equality with God but took on the form of a servant. And in recommitting ourselves to that guiding story, we are making a commitment to one another to serve and love each other in the way and name of Jesus. Yes, there is a big task. But the big, wide, high, deep love of God carries us. The concentric circles will follow, and we will each be called to act and speak in small or big ways, not all the same ways, but certainly in ways that require us to go beyond ourselves and beyond what is comfortable. We will love and advocate, love and resist, love and give of ourselves because we are following the One who did that so beautifully and so well. We pray this may be so today through us. Amen.

² <https://www.dallasnews.com/life/faith/2017/08/08/first-baptists-robert-jeffress-god-given-trump-authority-take-kim-jong-un>

³ <http://www.aplainaccount.org/single-post/2016/03/14/Philippians-2511>