



FROM THE PULPIT

North Shore Congregational Church

“A World Religion”

Rev. Dr. Martin W. Hall – Preaching

Acts 10: 1-28

October 1, 2017

I think there is an important reminder that comes up for us on World Communion Sunday. It's so easy to get wrapped up in our own little ecclesiastical cocoons and lose sight of the broader scope of our faith. Whether we are talking about the creature comforts of the familiarity of our local church, or the somewhat protective envelope of our national fellowship, or even the visible and comprehensible face of Christianity throughout the United States, it is very easy to begin to translate those more localized elements of our faith into the reality of our faith as a whole, only to overlook the profound world-encompassing breadth of the Christian faith. But, World Communion Sunday serves as a meaningful reminder that those parts with which we are familiar – those elements that so often become the face of Christianity in our minds – are nothing but a tiny piece of a worldwide puzzle that forms our worldwide faith.

Let me put it into perspective for you. Nearly every one of the 230+ countries, territories and dependencies in the world has some form of active Christian expression (churches, missions, service, whatever...). The Bible, in its entirety, has been translated into 553 languages, the New Testament has been translated in over 1,300, and there is at least one book of the Bible or another available in nearly 3,000 modern tongues. There are roughly 230 million Christians in the United States, while worldwide one third of the population, that's 2.4 billion, are Christian. In other words, less than 10% of the world's Christians live in the United States. You can spend all day having historical and socio-political arguments about the framers of the Constitution and whether or not the United is, or was meant to be, a 'Christian nation.' But, I think what sometimes gets missed in the middle of those debates is our American haughtiness that sometimes gets wrapped up in those ecclesiastical cocoons and begins to treat Christianity as and American religion. And, that simply couldn't be further from the truth. And, that matters, because it simply didn't use to be that way!

I shared the story of Peter and Cornelius this morning (one we touched on not too long ago), because I think it speaks volumes to the importance of remembering the breadth of our faith. Because, it didn't use to be that way! And, that was Peter's issue here!

You see, in the Judaism of his time – and really in the vast majority of all the religious expression of the time – biological culture and faith were extremely tied to one another. You were, with little exception, the faith of your people. Look back into the Old Testament war stories and see the references to ‘my god’ over ‘the God of the Israelites’ and you will see kings and peoples who each had their god, their faith, their form of religious expression that were owned and understood by the people of that kingdom, that region, that culture, etc... The notion of a world-reaching broad-spectrum faith simply wasn’t a significant part of the equation. For the most part, religion spread because one kingdom conquered another and their faith took over – not because people converted from one faith to the next.

And that marriage of culture and religious expression was even more systematically institutionalized in the Jewish faith by the time of Jesus. Not only was Judaism a thing of the Jewish people, but those outside of that cultural and religious expression were often seen as unclean, unworthy and unwanted. The despicable Gentiles who worshipped their Pagan god’s, ate defiled foods and lived unclean lives were not only separate from the Jewish faith, but they were unwanted and unwelcome. The very notion that Peter would be asked to go share the news of Jesus (something he understood to be an extension of their Jewish faith) – the notion that Peter would be asked to go to the Gentiles proclaiming welcome, acceptance and faith to those who had been deemed, for generations, to be unwelcome and unwanted was absurd. Why would he go to Cornelius, a Gentile, with a proclamation of a faith that belonged to the Jews? It was patently absurd – until God reminded him of one very important thing... ‘You don’t get to decide who’s welcome and who’s not! Because, my table is open to all!’

That, to me, in its simplest terms, is the profound reminder of World Communion Sunday. In a world in which, for many reasons, faith was particularly localized...in a world in which religious expression tended to be the property of the region or culture of which you were a part...Jesus came and wiped out every line, broke down every wall, challenged every barrier, and proclaimed a faith to which all were invited, all were wanted and all were welcome. “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith,” Paul writes to the Galatians. “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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.” (Galatians 3: 26-28) Jesus came into a world in which faith and religious expression were held for the people who were deemed worthy of that faith, and to that world Jesus claimed an open and welcome to all, that no matter who you were or where you were from, you were welcomed and accepted by grace into the family of God in Jesus Christ.

I shared that quote as our Call to Meditation today, not because I have any idea who this English priest was, but because I simply loved the underlying truth that it represented. “I would celebrate the Holy Communion service in my pajamas,” he says, “if I thought it would help someone find faith.” Jesus came into a world in which faith and religious expression was the property of a people that was so often held for only those people, and he proclaimed a faith in which one of the foremost goals was to share the wonder and joy of that faith with anyone and everyone we met in any way and every way we could – even if it meant taking communion in pajamas. Jesus came and preached a welcome to every person in every corner of this world – that we might gather together at God’s table and celebrate the joys and wonders of our faith in him, no matter who we

were or where we were from. And, here we stand, some 2,000 years later – from one corner of the globe to the other, doing exactly that!