

We Believe....
1 Corinthians 11:27-29
A Sermon for World Communion Sunday
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This morning I want to take you back to the earliest days of the Christian Church. You know that because of the missionary efforts of Paul and other apostles and other believers, the good news of the gospel began to spread all around the world. Fanning out from Jerusalem, the Christian faith was carried to cities like Corinth and Ephesus and Philippi. But it also spread south and west across Africa and east into Asia. All over that part of the world, there were pockets of Christian believers.

But, of course, in that day long distance communication was slow and expensive, and travel was also slow and expensive, so there was not a lot of contact or interaction between these local Christian communities. When there were differences or conflicts, they were resolved within the individual community. Which meant that the church in one place might hold one opinion, while a church in another place might hold an entirely different opinion. They may worship in different ways; they may practice the faith in different ways; they may hold different views. The one unifying thing that tied them all together was their belief that Jesus was Lord.

Over the next couple of hundred years, the church continued to grow and spread, and as it did, variations and differences began to take hold here and there.

For example, there was the problem about what to do with people who had been Christians, but when the persecutions began, they renounced their faith in Jesus to avoid persecution, but now that the persecutions had ended, they wanted to be readmitted to the Christian church. In some places it was decided that they could come back; in other places it was decided that they could not.

Also, there were debates about what was required of the church leaders. Were there certain standards that a person had to meet to be ordained? Some communities had one set of standards, while other communities had other standards. Some communities set pretty restrictive and conservative standards; others had more open and liberal standards for ordination.

The biggest and most divisive issue of the day had to do with the way people understood the saving work of Jesus. There was universal agreement that Jesus was Savior and Lord, but there was disagreement about how the saving work of Jesus took place.

Are you still with me?

Here was the issue. There was universal agreement that God was perfect, unchangeable, eternal; and that human beings were imperfect, changeable and temporary. What people couldn't agree on was what camp Jesus was in. Some people said that Jesus was sent from God, the son of God, God incarnate, God in human form. They believed that the saving work of Jesus was because it was the very Son of God who died on the cross for us.

The other view was that Jesus was created by God like other human beings were created. Jesus was a human being who perfectly followed God's law, and was his perfect obedience that enabled him to stand before God on behalf of all humanity.

Believe it or not, this issue was so divisive that in some places there were riots in the streets. How you answered this question could be fighting words.

So, in the year 325, the Roman emperor Constantine convened a council of Christian leaders from all over the world. They gathered in the city of Nicaea, in present day Turkey.

One historian who was present at the council talked about the gathering.

There were gathered the most distinguished ministers of God, from the many churches in Europe, Africa and Asia. A single house of prayer, as if enlarged by God, sheltered Syrians and Cilicians, Phoenicians and Arabs...[and the list goes on]. (Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, p. 186)

Here for the first time all of these various local Christian communities gathered as one worldwide community of believers. Here for the first time they could see that the Body of Christ was not a bunch of little isolated communities, but a worldwide family. This Council at Nicaea was visible proof of the universal Christian community.

The emperor Constantine charged the council to resolve these various regional differences on behalf of the whole Christian church. So the Nicaean council addressed the problem of what to do about lapsed believers, and it addressed the standards of ordination for church leaders. And it tackled the big issue about Jesus.

(Note: for a very readable account of the Council of Nicaea and the Arian Controversy, see *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1, by Justo Gonzalez, p. 181-192.)

For days they debated and discussed, and they voted. They put their conclusion in an affirmation of faith that we call the Nicene Creed. This creed is a part of our Book of Confessions, and we are going to say it in just a few minutes. Take out your bulletin and let's look at it for a minute.

The Council of Nicaea concluded that Jesus was not a creature made by God like other human beings, but the very Son of God—begotten not made. So look in that second paragraph—"God of Gods, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made."

This creed became the affirmation of the whole church.

Certainly after the Council of Nicaea adjourned and the delegates went back home, there were still individual believers and even individual communities that disagreed with the position taken by the Council of Nicaea. But, in spite of their differences, they understood that they were a part of a larger Body of Christ, and they began to accept the idea that the Body of Christ is bigger than any individual or even any localized group of believers.

Look at the very first word of the Nicene Creed: "We." "We believe...." They were affirming that the Body of Christ is not about ME; it's about WE; not so much what I believe, but what WE believe.

Actually all this harkens back to an issue that Paul addressed with the Christian community in Corinth. That's where Paul said that the Christian community is like a Body—lots of different parts, but all coming together as one unified body. This where he said that the hand cannot say to the foot, "I have no need of you." And the eye cannot say

to the ear, “I have no need of you.” No, all the individual parts work together for the good of the whole body.

In the scripture we read Paul was talking to these Christians in Corinth about when they gathered around Christ’s Table for communion. And he said that if you eat and drink without discerning the body, you do so unworthily. Now I don’t think that Paul was saying here that we are supposed to see that the little pieces of bread represent the broken body of Jesus. No, Jesus was saying that we are to look around us and see the other people who have gathered with us and understand that we have all been invited and all given a place at the Table. We are all individual members of the one worldwide Body of Christ. “Discern the body,” Paul said.

So now here we are on this World Communion Sunday. On this day all around the world Christians are gathering around Christ’s Table to give thanks for the blessings that God has given to us in Jesus Christ. In churches with tall steeples and churches with no steeples at all; in churches where hundreds gather and in churches where there are only two or three; in churches where everyone is of like mind and in churches where there are differences of opinion; in liberal churches and conservative churches—Christ’s disciples are gathering. People across the whole spectrum of Christianity are taking their places around Christ’s Table. The only requirement for admission is saying that you believe in Jesus.

On this World Communion Sunday of all days we are reminded of the fact that we are a part of a worldwide body of Christ. On this day, we affirm that it’s not about ME; it’s about WE.

Now, together, let us affirm what we believe.✠