Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
October 1, 2023 – Elizabeth Bryce

Scripture Reading: Exodus 3:7-14

Sermon: Who are We? Who are You? (World Communion Sunday)

Who are we?

We are Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Southern Baptist, Apostolic, Assemblies of God, Lutheran and Evangelical Lutheran, Methodist, United Methodist, Free Methodist and Wesleyan, Anglican, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, United Church of Canada, Uniting Church of Australia, United Congregations of Aotearoa and New Zealand, Christian Reformed, Four Square, Vineyard, Presbyterian, Seventh Day Adventists, Amish, Mennonite, Christian Brethren, Ukanian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Christian, and maybe – depending on your definition, the Unitarians.

And that is just a sliver, a small sample, a very incomplete list of all the different traditions and denominations that call themselves the Christian church.

If you took all the people, all the resources, all the real estate of the Christian church, we would probably be even more ubiquitous than Google, more powerful than any government, and even more visible than shawarmas in Ottawa.

Unfortunately (or fortunately depending on your perspective) trying to get different churches of different denominations to work together is almost impossible,
Trying to get different congregations of the same denomination to share their resources together is always a challenge. Trying to get different ethnic and cultural representations of the same tradition to agree on something is the impossible dream. Even the World Council of Churches, which tries to bring the Christian church together on common ground, has insiders and outsiders, splits and divisions, schisms and sects that will never belong.

In the third century after Christ, a Christian father known as Hippolytus wrote a document, the Anaphora, which became the basis of almost every Christian celebration of communion. Which depending on your tradition may be called: the eucharist, the Lord's supper, the mass, holy communion, the divine liturgy, the table of the Lord, or the banquet of the kingdom.

The cadence of the opening words sound very familiar, even after translation from the original Latin:
The Lord be with you. **And with thy spirit.**
Lift up your hearts. **We lift them up unto the Lord.**[8]
Let us give thanks to the Lord. **It is right and just so to do.**

Then there is a long prayer of Thanksgiving – much like our prayer today – where it recalls the history of God at work in the world, and always concludes with the gift of Jesus.

Then the words of institution, which recall Jesus' last supper with his friends in the upper room.

Then finally, a prayer that we might all receive the Holy Spirit by the sharing of the bread and cup.

Our communion prayer is an affirmation of *who we are*, and *who we understand God to be*. We might be feeling a lot like Moses when he was standing by the burning bush. God was commanding him to go to Egypt and free the people. Moses was witnessing God's compassion for a people living in slavery and oppression, but the first question he asked was: *Who am I to challenge Pharoah*? And his second question was *Who are you, God, to upset the way society works?*

God has a way of transcending all our categories and barriers, of disrupting our rules and regulations.

Of course, even when we do follow some of the traditional formula, each church's communion table has its own flavour, its own character, its own understanding of what communion means. For some it is a memorial to Jesus, for others it is thanksgiving for creation. For some it is an invocation of the Spirit, for others it's a sign that we should be feeding the world with bread and justice. For some it is a sign of salvation from sin (sometimes for members only?), while for others it is a welcome to all God's children, and the liberation that comes when we eat together.

There are some churches that carefully control who can take communion, or which elements they may consume, according to their age, baptismal status, or membership. Some churches grant permission based on the number of services attended, or regular contributions to the offering… And there are others (like ours) who say if you are ready, then we are ready. Because all are welcome.

That is why we rarely take communion together between various denominations. I have attended a couple of ecumenical events sponsored by the World Council of Churches – where we pray together, we work together, we care for one another. But we do not share in the Lord's supper. We can't even agree what goes on the plate or in the cup, let alone agree on the theology of why we have gathered around one common table.

After spending many sessions learning about the different traditions and denominations in the Christian church, a Christian theologian and professor was asked this question by a student: "You have talked about all the differences in our churches. Is there anything that Unites us?" The answer the professor gave could have been said in any church, in any denomination, in any mosque or synagogue, any gudwara or temple or shrine. He said:

“It’s the things we love that unite us. Unfortunately, we love too few things.” We love too few things more than we love our divisions and separations. It’s one thing for churches to disagree with one another, but it’s another thing to demonize someone whom God has been invited to sit across the table from you.

There are more than 8 billion people in the world – there are endless possibilities for us to show Christian love. But perhaps we only love the ones who we see on Sunday morning, or who live near us, or who look like us, or who think like us.

What would it truly mean for us to set a table for 8 billion people in the world? What would it mean for us to live the promise when we say that everyone is welcome. That everyone is loved.

Unfortunately, Christians are often known more for what they hate, rather than what they love. Our faith is frequently used as the excuse that Christians make when they are fearful of others. Our name and our scriptures and our traditions are then used exclude and to control and to punish.

All 8 billion of God’s children matter. All are invited – we don’t have to wait to go to heaven to live in peace together. Jesus’ life, death and new life – the same resurrection experience we speak about and we celebrate at every communion – Jesus’ rising over death means that we are invited to start living God’s promise right now. And to do our best to drag the rest of the world along with us. Even if Pharoah stands in our way.

It’s an uphill climb. But we will not be alone. For along with all those Christian denominations and all those faith-filled traditions – we have God’s own promise, given to Moses and to us,

‘I will be with you” Thanks be to God.