

What Unites Us

August 5, 2018

Psalm 42:1-51 1 Peter 2:9-10

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Psalm 42 opens with the image of a deer longing for flowing streams of cool water. As the deer thirsts for cool waters, so the psalmist tells us, “My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” The psalmist’s soul, the psalmist’s entire being and whole self, longs for God.

This psalmist is our teacher and guide. This morning our search for God brings us to the communion table, where through the Holy Spirit God is present to us in the bread and in the cup. The table reminds us of the upper room where so long ago Jesus offered the same elements to his disciples saying “This is my body.” and “This is my blood.” For those thirsting for God, this table is where to find the cool water of God’s presence.

In the psalm this need for God is inseparable from the need a community where we can share the worship of God. Psalm 42 is believed to have been written at a time when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. The psalmist can no longer go to the temple in Jerusalem. Being part of the worshiping community, part of the throng entering into the house of God are only memories. Singing the songs of thanksgiving, joining with the multitude in celebrating the festivals of faith are also only memories. The psalmist aches to once again be part of all of this, to share in the life and joy of a people at worship.

What the psalmist was denied is what we are sharing this morning. Our worship abounds with community. It starts when we enter the door and someone greets us. Soon we are singing, which gives voice to community. This is true whether we sing on key or off, but singing on key does make the community sound a little more harmonious. The responsive call to worship, the passing of the peace, the shared prayers, even the passing of the offering plates are all expressions of community.

This Sunday, a communion Sunday, we have another powerful expression of community in the bread and cup we share. There is an “allness” about communion – all invited, all welcomed, all included. In a world that separates and pits one against another, our communion asserts oneness and unity. We all hunger, we all thirst, and we are all invited to the table.

I’ve had the privilege of serving communion here many times at First UCC. Each time I find it powerful and moving to look down the aisle and see people lined up, a diverse human family, all united in a common search for God. Communion brings our search for God and our search for community together as one.

Stories about its community life are treasures of a church. When I was working as an interim minister, I'd ask for a congregational meeting early on and ask a series of questions: What had been most life giving for you as part of this church? What is your best memory of your time here? What about this church has given you your greatest joy?

I'm heartbroken to report that not once did anyone mention a sermon as what was most life giving in the church. Invariably what they did mention was something that had to do with community. For one church it was a potluck where everybody brought beans. That happened years ago but the person telling it couldn't stop laughing. Then there was the Christmas pageant where one of the cute little lambs went very much astray. There was a communion story featuring the bread, the cup, and two bats. Then there was the Thanksgiving service, where someone put cornstalks on the altar. Great, except no one had made sure that the corn stalks were mice free. Halfway through the service, it started to move! All the stories were fun, and they were all about life in a community of worship.

My personal favorite community story here at First UCC took place at WFFF on a Wednesday night, some years ago now. After supper we were asked to make paper chains for the Christmas tree in the Assembly Room. The Rev. David Maitland and I were working together at a table that we shared with two girls, both around five six who were also making a paper chain.

David and I were earnest and devout in our work – just as you'd expect from two theologians - but we just couldn't get the hang of it. Paper, scissors, and a glue stick – just too complicated for us to coordinate and sequence properly. Besides we've been given a defective glue stick. Either no glue came out or a great surge of glue over everything. I'm not claiming sabotage exactly, but I am claiming an extenuating circumstance as to why our paper chain was destined for the back of the tree where no one could see it.

Anyway, we still weren't finished when one of the girls– she and her partner had long since finished their paper chain – took pity on our incompetence and asked, "Need some help?" Yes we sorely needed help, and with a flourish of competence, she finished the last few links for us. Of course she also had a far superior glue stick. Every time I remember this story I smile, and want to go out and make some more paper chains. For me it was the perfect experience of what the community of church really feels like.

Community is at the very heart of our United Church of Christ. We see on a bulletin cover that the motto of this denomination is "That they may all be one." This motto is both a look back at our history, as we were formed out of the union of two quite different denominations – the Evangelical and Reformed Church uniting with the Congregational Christian Church in 1957 – and also a look ahead, as we seek to be one as a diverse community of faith.

We're not there yet, far from it. But unity is our stated goal, and we've worked hard to achieve it. With so much and so many trying to pull people apart, it's vital to remember these words of Jesus, "That they may all be one." It is a call to recognize our common humanity and to overcome the barriers that separate us.

In our New Testament scripture we are told, "Once you were not a people but now you are God's people; once you have not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." The God we seek at the communion table is a God of love and mercy, who accepts us though by the word's standards we are unacceptable. As God accepts us, so we seek to accept one another. As God cares for us, so we care for one another. As God forgives us, so we forgive one another. As God loves us, so we love one another. As we have experienced these gifts of God here in church, so we seek when the worship is ended to take them outside of the church into the world.

I invite us all as we prepare for the sacrament of Holy Communion, to think again about that psalmist from long ago. Our 21st century world would certainly be unrecognizable to the psalmist. But he or she would recognize our hunger for God and community in a heartbeat. For us this morning, this longing brings us as one people to the table, to share in the bread and cup – the gifts of God for the people of God. Amen.