

WHEN IT'S TIME TO UNITE

I Corinthians 1:10-17

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a heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout,
but love and I had a wit to win,
we drew a circle that took him in.*

I would like to complete this series of sermons on human relationships by talking about Christian unity. One bread, one body, one cup of blessing which we bless. Come...to the table. Come to the table, we need to talk.

At the table, communication happens. People are drowning in information, but starving for communication. As one businessman said, "I don't understand. I have two phone lines, e-mail, a computer, cell phone, Palm Pilot and a fax machine. I've got everything you could imagine and yet, my children still tell me I'm out of touch."

And so it is in life. Conversation matters, regardless of all of our instruments and technology. There comes a time to sit down face-to-face, eye-to-eye, and talk with one another that we might find common ground. It is true in your family; it is true in every arena of life. Conversation matters.

In 1997 the Washington Capitals were one of the best hockey teams around. They were winning all the way to the Stanley Cup Finals. They were on a roll. Two years later, in 1999, they were at the bottom of the barrel. They could not win a game regardless of how hard they tried. They lost yet another game up in Vancouver and boarded the plane for the ride home. They cranked up the VCR's so they could try to forget what had just happened to them one more time. The VCR broke. There was no movie. In the silence they were forced to talk to one another. Soon they began to move around, talking to people here and there. They began to ask the question, "What's wrong with us? How do we form a team out of this group of people?" By the time they left the plane, there was a new hockey team. They won the next eleven games in a row, because they learned to communicate with one another.

Come to the table. We need to talk. Deborah Tannen, Professor of Linguistics at Georgetown University, says that you and I live in an argumentative culture. Westerners, particularly, have assumed the way to truth is to choose up sides and argue about it until we find a way. I love debate. I have had my share of debates in every arena on life. I have spent time on the conference floors debating issues. But the older I get, the less I am certain that debate is the way to gather the truth. The problem with a debate is we assume there are two sides. There are seldom two sides to anything. At least there is your side, my side, and the truth. So, at

the very least there are three sides to everything that happens among us. How can we imagine that by speaking louder we will ever be able to listen and to hear? Maybe it is time to discern. Maybe it is time to hear the voice of God. Maybe it is time to hear another voice speaking with accents clear and sweet above the murmurs of passion as a determination of my self-will. Come to the table. We need to talk.

Come to the table. We need to commune. We need to connect, to be together as a body. Come to the table. Sometimes I wonder, did Jesus have any idea when He lifted the bread and broke it at that table so long ago how broken His body would eventually become? Did he have any idea? If somehow we are to become one body under one Lord, a lot of egos are going to have to kneel at the Cross. Christ must be crowned King of kings, Lord of lords.

Sometimes we thought it might happen. For a moment that September day last fall it seemed as if our differences did not matter so much. We could join hand with strangers. We could pray together with people regardless of their history. The urgency and emergency of the moment brought us into that kind of communion one with another. Then, we sort of got back to normal. The Baptists decided they really could not be in the same room with the Buddhists. Empowered by the media, Reverend Davis in our city began to articulate the evils of Islam. A couple of weeks ago, Lipscomb University informed us that United Methodists could not have a worship service in their auditoriums. Even today in Brentwood when we gather at a table to hold communion, I recognize that at many, many tables you and I would not be welcomed at all. Sometimes I begin to wonder down in my own soul if Paul was not enunciating the anguish of the present life, "Is Christ divided?" Was our Lord, who ate with tax collectors and sinners and talked about sheep of other folds, a separatist? Will we let the table of grace keep us from grace? Come to the table...we need to talk. One bread, one body, one Lord of all.

Rise from the table. Go from the table. Leave this place. Touch the world with an insistence on the common good. This world does not exist for your pleasure. Life is not meant just to satisfy you. The name of the game is not to have it your way, do your own thing, and accomplish your own purposes. That came as a very difficult and hard lesson for me in the Church. It was one of the most difficult lessons I have ever learned, that the church did not exist to fulfill my pleasure. I was in my second pastorate. Things were going extremely well; success was going to my head; I was on a roll. Then, I had a really difficult Board meeting one night and furthermore, the denomination decided it was going to slam some doors that I thought to be opened. On Monday morning, I was out of sorts. The money was counted by a layperson of the church. He came in and I wailed and bemoaned the restrictive nature of the church. I said in that conversation, "I think I'll just go out and start my own church." Russell listened patiently for over half an hour. Standing up to leave he said in a gentle spirit, "Howard, when you start that church of your own, I wouldn't build it too big if I were you." I have never forgotten that.

I am sorry, but the Church does not exist to meet your needs. The Church does not exist for your pleasure. The Church exists to serve a common good and a reigning Lord. What is true in the Church is true in culture as well. You and I have got to change the question. It is not, "What's in it for me?" It is, "What's best for us?" It is not, "What can I get out of the world?" It is, "What can I give to the community?" How can the world be a better place because I crossed the stage of life? *You have some reason to be born, save to consume the corn and eat the fish and leave behind a dirty dish.*

You have a better reason to be here than that. Some people have discovered it. Peter Lynch was one of the wisest stockbrokers in the history of the stock market. He made his money by the age of forty-eight and retired. People asked Peter, "What are you going to do?" assuming he would say consulting or something. Peter Lynch said, "I'm going down to my church and I'm going to work with kids, because kids are the best investment. They beat the heck out of the stock market every day."

Have you found a reason to be born, a reason to live? Rise from the table to serve the common good. Go from this table. Go out into the world, all around the world. It is amazing and staggering to me when I think about addressing you on Sunday. Literally, this congregation goes around the world every week!

Go around the world seeking not only the common good, but working for that common ground by which we will be able to link one with another. As broken as we are, occasionally it happens. Over in Memphis, January the 21st, a group of church leaders representing 22 million Christians said, "You know, we've got more in common than we do apart." Standing at the hotel where Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, they committed together to end the sin of racism and to break down barriers in these communities themselves. There were nine denominations together seeking relational kinds of unity so that we can recognize one another's baptisms, ordinations, and one another's table. "Come to the table," we said then. Bishop Talbert, who celebrated Communion in this sanctuary on Christmas Eve, said, "It is only a start and we have a long, long way to go, but it's a start and we need to start more things like that all of the time."

I think we have a calling as United Methodists. We need to put our name to work. We have the possibilities as a denomination to bring people together. We are the denomination of the golden mean. Sometimes we consider that crippling. I know we need poles. Everybody needs poles, but this denomination does not work well with extremes. It does well with the middle and so I say to you today, will you meet me in the middle? Will you meet me in middle where Jesus is Lord and freedom is celebrated? Will you meet me in the middle where red and yellow, black and white are all equal in God's site? Will you meet me in the middle where ministry is not a matter of gender but a matter of gracious invitation from God? Will you meet me in the middle where marriage is not a matter of power but a place of peace for all? Will you meet me in the middle

where virgin is not a dirty word and pregnancy is not an unforgivable sin? Will you meet me in the middle where we do not check sexual orientation at the door, but all live by biblical standards? Will you meet me in the middle where life is sacred and precious, but everyone has a right to choose? Will you meet me in the middle where all are welcomed at a table like this? Will you meet me in the middle, close enough to God that you can hear God, but not so far away from people that you cannot hear them, too? Remember that they are there. They are there by the millions trying to find a latch that opens the door that leads to God. But more importantly for you and for me, there is one or two now and then in the circles of our lives who are longing for our help to find their way home to God. Will you meet me in the middle?

In Warsaw, Germany, right before Hitler's invasion, a Quaker Missionary was working in the ghettos. Her death caused a major problem in that little town. You see, there was a Roman Catholic cemetery and a Jewish cemetery, but there was no place to bury a Quaker. Finally, the Arch Bishop agreed to let the missionary be buried right outside the fence of the Roman Catholic Cemetery. Thousands came because this loved lady had given her life for the least and the lost. And that night somebody had a wit to win. They went out and moved the fence and took her in.

*He drew a circle that shut me out,
a heretic, a rebel, a thing to flout,
but love and I had a wit to win,
we drew a circle that took him in.*

Amen.

