

**“Communing with the Spirit”**

**A Sermon for University Congregational Church**

**Sunday, October 6, 2019**

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TRADITIONAL WORD

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.—Corinthians 10:17

CONTEMPORARY WORD

“the very last thing I want to do is to unsettle in the mind of any Christian, whatever his denomination, the concepts -- for him traditional -- by which he finds it profitable to represent to himself what is happening when he receives the bread and wine. I could wish that no definitions had ever been felt to be necessary; and, still more, that none had been allowed to make divisions between churches.” — C.S. Lewis

“The question is not what you look at, but what you see. It is only necessary to behold the least fact or phenomenon, however familiar, from a point a hair's breadth aside from our habitual path or routine, to be overcome, enchanted by its beauty and significance.” — Henry David Thoreau

“He had very few doubts, and when the facts contradicted his views on life, he shut his eyes in disapproval.” — Hermann Hesse

Why would we ever think, that in a world as divided, polarized and quick to anger as this, that we could actually have a “World Communion Sunday”? An actual time when every Christian would partake of the “Lord’s Supper” as one body. What hubris! What Folly! And why would we ever even want to engage in such a thing? Why, we’re Congregationalists, the most separate of a separate Protestantism. We’re the proudest of the proud individualists! And yet here we are, celebrating with other Christians all over the world—an event that occurred over 2000 years ago. A simple act of remembrance of a man who taught that all humanity is loved by

God—made in God’s image—all of us are deserving of love and kindness. How do we as a church and as people of God work in the world to cross divisions and to bring others together?

Eighteen years ago, the small Canadian town called Gander on an island in the North Atlantic Ocean took in nearly 6,700 people – almost doubling its population – when the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks in New York and Washington forced 38 planes to land there.

Their simple hospitality to the unexpected house guests drew worldwide accolades and even inspired a Broadway musical—Come From Away—which I have been so fortunate to have seen twice now and each time I come away more stunned and amazed at what this little community did during that dark time.

Diane Davis, a Ganderite who worked at the elementary school where they took care of 750 folks that week said: “Everyone looks at us and says that’s an amazing thing that you did, and the bottom line is I don’t think it was an amazing thing, I think it was the right thing you do,”

In a world today seemingly fraught with division, terrorism and hate, the Ganderites have repeated to the world that they’d do it all over again. Kindness is woven into the very fabric of their nature — they don’t know any other way to live.

“What we consider the most simple thing in life is to help people,” said Mayor Claude Elliott, retired now after serving as the town’s leader for 21 years. “You’re not supposed to look at people’s color, their religion, their sexual orientation — you look at them as people.”

To give you an idea of life in Gander, start with this: Many Ganderites don't lock the doors to their homes or cars. Everyone says hello to everyone. People know their neighbors. "My love" or "my dear" adorn every other sentence — except the Newfie accent makes the "my" sound like "me."

When Garry Tuff, then acting manager of safety and security for emergency response services at Gander International Airport, saw the second plane hit the World Trade Center, he knew his town of 10,000 people would be impacted. The airport in Gander marks the closest point between Europe and the U.S. and is a preferred emergency landing spot for medical and other emergencies. The 38 planes came "fast and furious" into the airport a short while later.

After figuring out how to park all the planes, some of which later started sinking into the pavement because of their weight and the warm temperatures, officials spent the next 24 hours unloading luggage and people. Passengers faced intense scrutiny as they passed through customs--Everybody was a suspect, as no one knew exactly what was happening. But everyone was a guest, too. Beyond the basics of food and water, some passengers on board needed medicine. Many left prescriptions in checked, inaccessible luggage. Pharmacists in town worked around the clock to fill prescriptions and provide for the needs of the refugees.

Israel, Austria, Spain, Poland, France, the Philippines, Iran, Italy, England, Germany, Thailand, Belgium, Ukraine, Africa, Hungary, Uganda, Senegal, Russia, United Arab Emirates and just about every state in the USA. The "come from aways," as Newfoundlanders call anyone not from the island, were from all over the world, and

despite the intense, chaotic situation, no one in Gander batted an eye — prejudice against anyone is an entirely foreign concept here.

Today, the crosswalk in front of Gander's town hall, the bridge that spans the gap from one side of the street to the other—that crosswalk is painted as a rainbow, and churches there raised thousands of Canadian dollars to welcome five Syrian refugee families into the community. Many in Gander don't understand the division and hate in other parts of the world.

Yet, over and over again, residents there say what happened in Gander isn't unique, that anyone would lend a hand in a crisis, even pointing to residents in Texas and around the U.S. who helped during Hurricane Harvey and other natural disasters.

Bridging the gap between the exiled and the one who is home—helping the exile and the refugee-- is part of a great communion—a way to pull the gaps between us a little tighter—a little smaller.

The community of early followers-of-Christ were possibly even more divided than we think. Hear the words from Paul's first letter to the community in Corinth:

Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols. 15 I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Ever since something called the church has arisen in the aftermath of the Christ Event, there have been differing ways to interpret that event and what it means for

humans. The church has never been united as a corporate body no matter how hard the leaders of that corporate body have tried. There are always renegades who claim that they alone hold the right interpretation of Jesus' teaching and work. The church, however you want to define it, has always been divided in beliefs and rituals and practices. But there, in the gaps—in the spaces between beliefs and rituals and practices—there can be found God.

C.S. Lewis, the brilliant Christian apologist wrote this about the divisions within the church: ““the very last thing I want to do is to unsettle in the mind of any Christian, whatever his denomination, the concepts -- for him traditional -- by which he finds it profitable to represent to himself what is happening when he receives the bread and wine. I could wish that no definitions had ever been felt to be necessary; and, still more, that none had been allowed to make divisions between churches.”

My own family has some great divides. My younger brother and his family converted to Russian Orthodoxy, as they live in Eastern Europe, and the rites and rituals of that ancient church appeal to them—very much. You can imagine the discussions and debates that he and I often have. Once, I asked him, as a thought experiment, to set aside the translation of the Hebrew Bible that most of us are familiar with (but that I have great trouble with because that particular translation is fraught with mistakes and mistranslations), and after a mighty passionate discussion it came down to this simple statement for my brother: It has been good enough for the church all of these years, and so it's good enough for us now. I responded that that type of thinking perpetuates the systems of injustice that are at the foundation of

many of our institutions and I am simply questioning if we've got it right-- and he shrugged his shoulders and looked at me and said: Well, you keep asking those questions. That's important, too. So, a family divided by many, many different things and yet united as a family. United by love, by a shared history and a desire for a better future.

I treasure these disagreements and debates. As I treasure every single time one of you disagrees with me. When you come up to me and say: "Interesting, Paul—but what about..." or "I always believed this..." or "I was taught this..." you open up in me questions and ideas that I've perhaps not thought about. And the best thing about our conversations is that you are trying to bridge the gap—you are trying to shrink the space between you and me. By asking me to look at something from a different perspective, you are giving me the opportunity for growth, knowledge and wisdom. Henry David Thoreau wrote this: "The question is not what you look at, but what you see. It is only necessary to behold the least fact or phenomenon, however familiar, from a point a hair's breadth aside from our habitual path or routine, to be overcome, enchanted by its beauty and significance." Each of you (and my brother) help me become more enchanted with the world. Keep asking questions!

Even as you and I discuss and sometimes disagree and even as my brother and I discussed these grand topics of theology and philosophy, my own self—my mind—was struggling with all that we are talking about. Trying to hold one concept over here and the struggling to discuss another over there—trying to be open to new possibilities and new ways of thinking—it's exhausting! It's much easier to simply

stay in my own lane, ignoring all of these other possibilities—ignoring the gap—the spaces even in my own arguments. It's easier and less exhausting to remain rigid in my own belief. Thinking is hard work and we sometimes would rather just leave the whole thing alone. As Herman Hesse said: "He had very few doubts, and when the facts contradicted his views on life, he shut his eyes in disapproval."

Communion is an opportunity for us to open our eyes-- regain our connection with each other-- with the church--with the world and indeed to regain our connection with our very selves. What if the spirit exists so that we can remember our common humanity? What if, when we breathe in, we breathe as one?

In my theology, God is in the space between—God is in the space between the particles of an atom—God is in the space between the cells of our body—God is in the space between you and me and God is in the space between belief. God is in that space, working with us, to help build love—the beloved community—a just world for everyone—by working to close the spaces—the gaps that divide us.

So, today when you take the simple elements of this simple meal—this bread—this drink—as the food is moving into you—embrace the space between you and it—see it for what it is—an attempt by God to pull you into deeper community with God-- with others—with life itself--an opportunity to bridge the gap between us all. This is the work of the spirit within us all—a communion of spirits and a communion with the other.

A little known story within the story of Gander is that of a person from the Middle East (with an accent, even) who continually asked the leaders of the community if he

could help with the preparation of food for the thousands of people. He was always met with resistance—there was an unspoken fear of him, given the fact that he looked and sounded so much like the terrorists who had caused this tragedy. When one community leader finally closed the gap—decreased the space between them—and actually got to know this person—to learn who he was and where he came from—well, only then did they learn that he was the head chef for a major hotel chain—of course, he could help feed this community. Of course he would be welcomed in the kitchen—and he was escorted into their makeshift kitchens and went to work.

Karen Combs told me a story of how she and JC were returning from a recent trip to New York City, where they got to see the musical “Come From Away” and that she was also reading the book: “The Day the World Came to Town” a book about Gander and that day . Her flight attendant noticed that she was reading the book and he started up a conversation with her. He was on a plane that was diverted to Gander that day. He was part of the community of refugees that needed shelter, food and clothing during that week exiled from his home. Karen shared that she and JC had just seen the show and that she was fascinated by what this community had done in a time of great division. Later, as she and JC were departing the plane, this flight attendant, with tears in his eyes, grabbed Karen, hugged her, thereby closing the gap between them—a gap that Karen had already begun to close with her genuine interest in his experiences—he hugged her and said: “In the years since this book came out, I’ve never seen anyone reading it—thank you—thank you for caring enough to look into what happened that day”.



We need to remember that we are all exiles at some point in our lives. We all are refugees from something. And we all have it within us to easily close the gaps of division, if we but reach out.

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus took the bread, blessed it and gave it to his disciples saying, take, eat, do this in remembrance of me. And the he took the cup, blessed it and said take, drink—do this in remembrance of me. As the choir reminded us earlier this morning—in remembrance of me—search for truth—in remembrance of me always love—in remembrance of me, don't look above—but in your heart—look in your heart for God.

As you take the bread, dip it in the juice and make it part of your body—think on how we all can close the gaps of division in our world, our church, our families and our own lives.

#### RESOURCES

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2017/09/08/gander-newfoundland-september-11-terror-attacks-kindess-come-from-away/631329001/>

Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version