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## Bears Be Gone: A Reflection for World Communion Sunday

Mark 9:38-41 The Message 38 John spoke up, "Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn't in our group." 39-41 Jesus wasn't pleased. "Don't stop him. No one can use my name to do something good and powerful, and in the next breath cut me down. If he's not an enemy, he's an ally. Why, anyone by just giving you a cup of water in my name is on our side. Count on it that God will notice."

Today we are celebrating World Communion Sunday. This annual celebration on the first Sunday of October originated in the Presbyterian Church in 1936, seventy-five years ago. But in almost no time at all, the idea spread far beyond the Presbyterian Church and by 1940 was being celebrated by many denominations and congregations all around the world.<sup>1</sup> Now lots of ideas that get proposed by one church or another, by one denomination or another, barely ever get off the ground in the place where they originate, much less make a lasting, multi-generational, worldwide impact. Why did this idea of celebrating World Communion Sunday take root so quickly in so many places?

Well, consider what was happening in 1936. The global financial depression continue unabated, with too many weary families struggling to feed themselves and unemployment running to heights that have, thank goodness, never been seen again. In 1936 the terrible Spanish Civil War began, which proved to be a training ground for the horrors of World War II. Nazi Germany re-occupied the Rhineland area by force, an area that had been agreed as off-limits to it by the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I. England's King Edward VIII abdicated his throne, an act that seemed almost unimaginable at the time and shook the British confidence in the monarchy. And between 1936 and 1940, when the celebration of World Communion Sunday could truly

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/abc-worldwidecommunionssunday.php>

said to have become “worldwide,” what was happening? Germany, Japan, England, and the United States were all caught up in preparations for war, civil war continued to rage in Spain, war had broken out in Ethiopia and between Japan and China, and by the time of World Communion Sunday in 1940, Germany had invaded Poland and thus began World War II, the sad successor to the war only twenty years earlier that was supposed to end all wars.<sup>2</sup>

Why, of all times, did the originators of World Communion Sunday pick such a time to begin this celebration and why did it spread so quickly and so far? Well, to begin to answer that, let me tell you a story. It’s a story about a man who decided to go hunting one day, hunting for bear. So he got himself ready, got all his equipment together, made sure he had everything he needed. And he took along a huge gun, the biggest rifle he owned, for he was bound and determined that he was going to bag him a bear. Well, he gets up in the mountains, out in the woods, and all of a sudden the biggest bear in the world leaped out from behind a rock. And before our hunter had any time to react, that bear had taken its mighty paw and slapped the gun right out of his hands. And, as you might imagine at this point, the man took off running -- running faster than he ever had in his life! -- with the bear right on his heels, slowly gaining on him, licking his lips as he chased our hapless hunter. He found himself right on the edge of a thousand foot cliff. He was trapped. There was nowhere to go. And the bear was lumbering closer and closer. And the hunter sank to his knees and prayed “*O Lord, please, please, get this bear some religion!*” And you know what? All of a sudden the bear stopped, thunderstruck, a kind of goofy look on his face, and slowly the bear's eyes looked toward heaven. And then, astonishingly, his lips began to move and the bear began to speak: “*Dear Lord, for the food we are about to receive, we are*

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<sup>2</sup>Going to [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com) and putting the calendar years 1936 through 1940 in turn into the search field will net a distressing set of compilations of what was happening in each year

*truly thankful."*

I have always thought that story was very funny. But at the same time, I also **wince in self-recognition** at its truthfulness. Because what did the bear's "getting religion" really mean? Well, in this case it meant that he ended up invoking God's blessing on the way he was going to behave anyway! – behavior that was less than good, less than honorable, less than noble and right. And that is why I wince – because I know that I – along with every other human being, and nations, and even churches – am sometimes indeed prone to dressing up my worst actions and motivations in high-minded, even pious language – but those motivations and actions are still, when all is said and done, **bears**. When Germany invaded the Rhineland in 1936 it did so with much idealistic-sounding language about how it was the "right" thing to do – but it was still a **bear**. When it invaded Poland in 1940, it disguised its aggression under the pretext of self-defense – but it was still a **bear**. And churches are not immune to disguising actions or beliefs or theologies but which can also end up being bears. Think about, for example, how many churches have claimed that they are the only true church, that they have the only right beliefs, that they, in some cases, are in fact the only way to salvation. The Eastern Orthodox churches maintain that they alone are "the one true church of Christ on earth." The official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church is that Protestant churches like ours aren't not even really churches. But before we feel too superior, we also need to remember that we Protestants are not immune either from the tendency to make such claims. One observer has insightfully noted that while Protestants tend not to give such a superior role to the church, they have often exchanged that role for each individual's interpretation of the Bible – but that has led to *"radical individualism and sectarian splintering into endless new denominations, each*

*one of which believes that it [has] the truth better than the group they left.*<sup>3</sup> And all of these claims to being “the one true way, the one true belief, the one true theology” are, my friends, **bears** – no matter how dressed up they may be in other language, other garb.

And so, in those years following 1936, those who originated World Communion Sunday looked out on a world that seemed positively teeming with all kinds of bears that were all dressed up in high-minded language but were still bears: the bear of nationalism, the bear of fanatic militarism, the bear of distrusting and disparaging those whose skin color or nationality was different, the bear of exclusivism and that bear of a claim that my way is the only way. But back to our question: why did they pick such a time as that for starting the celebration of World Communion Sunday? Well, I think that in its own way, the intention of World Communion Sunday is to confront those bears that bedevil our culture then and now, not with guns or hunting gear, but with a dramatic re-commitment to the power of the gospel to not only tame those bears of fear and cynicism and xenophobia but to transcend them. World Communion Sunday was and is an attempt to say that what divides us as people, as Christians, is not and should not be as important as the things that God calls us to be united by. It is an attempt to proclaim that while one’s beliefs are very, very important things, they are not the only things that matter and that separating from and being suspicious of those who are not “like us” is grievous to God. It is an attempt to recognize that all across church and world there are folks who may be very, very different and yet who do good things and who love Jesus too – even if they are not the things that we do and they don’t love in God in exactly the same way that we love.

It’s the same situation, really, that those disciples faced so long ago in our

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<sup>3</sup>Dan Clendenin, “The Journey with Jesus: Notes to Myself,” 9/25/06  
<http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20060925JJ.shtml>

reading for this morning. Did you hear it? They came to Jesus and said “*Teacher, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn’t in our group.*” And Jesus responded “Doh!!” (well, he didn’t actually say that but you can almost see him slapping his forehead in frustration), and said to them “*don’t stop him.... If he’s not an enemy, he’s an ally.*” For you see, even Jesus’ disciples fell prey to the bear of excluding others; even the disciples could fall victim to the belief that being part of the right group, doing the right things, following the right leader, having the right beliefs was the only thing that mattered. That little line in John’s mouth on behalf of the disciples speaks volumes about falling prey to these temptations, doesn’t it: “He wasn’t in our group”; or, as the Revised Standard translation has it, “*He was not one of us.*” **He was not one of us.**

Those temptations to exclude and draw lines, to be suspicious of those who are “not like us,” “not one of us,” had not gone away in 1936 – nor have they gone away in 2011! And so, to cut to the chase, here is why World Communion Sunday is important; in preacher Dan Clendenin’s words, “*World Communion Sunday affords Christians an opportunity to confess our propensity to exclude people who are different from us: ‘He was not one of us.’*”<sup>4</sup> And even in the midst of war and rumors of war, in 1936 or 2011, Christians – **when they are at their best** – have recognized that indeed we need the powerful symbols of this meal and this annual intentional reminder that those ways that we often define what it means to be “one of us” are not finally determinative of what God wants and that we can and are and ought to be one with all kinds of people that those bears that live inside of us might rather diss or dismiss or deny or denigrate. To quote Rev. Clendenin once again: “*Instead of [giving in] to our insecurities about those whom we find strange or fringe, [defaulting] to ignorance [and] fear,... we do well to celebrate the considerable diversity that exists both within and among our Christian*

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<sup>4</sup>ibid.

*traditions.... [A]uthentic Christianity celebrates genuine diversity along with our many continuities and commonalities....”<sup>5</sup>*

Folks in a thousand places large and small, in congregations tiny and tremendous, have gathered on this day around a Table to remember Christ, to celebrate what He has done for them – but not just for them, but for the whole world. They have gathered to remember that finally the phrase, **“He is not one of us,”** is a phrase that a Christian should never, ever say. For we are all of God and therefore bound to one another. By last count, there were over 9000 denominations worldwide and probably uncountable numbers of congregations. Some on this World Communion Sunday will receive communion as we will do, passing trays of bread and cups; others will come forward and will receive a small wafer into the palm of their hands. Others will come forward to receive, tearing a piece of bread from a broken loaf and then dipping it into the common cup. Some today will regard the bread and the cup as being fully and actually the body and blood of our Lord and Savior. Others will regard the entire sacrament as a symbolic memorial.

The difference in the forms of communion abound. But even more striking, in words of one preacher,<sup>6</sup> are [the] *“differences... in how our brothers and sisters around the world view the sacrament. Some will think that their way of doing [it] is the only proper way to do it. Some... will welcome only those persons who have made a public profession of their faith..., while others will welcome very young children, even babies to the table. Some will insist that each person must belong to [their] denomination... [O]thers will have an table open to ‘all those who love the Lord and desire to walk in his*

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<sup>5</sup>**ibid.**

<sup>6</sup>From a sermon by Richard J. Fairchild, “These Things We Share,” <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/a-or27sx.php> Note that I have also used much of Fairchild’s characterization and language in the previous paragraph as well.

*path.”*

Indeed, there **are** a tremendous variety of practices and understandings this day as we celebrate the Lord's Supper around the world. But in the end it is Jesus' words that continue to come back to us across the ages: *“He – or she – that is not against us is for us.”* Yes, you and I will continue to have our theological disagreements with others who bear the name Christian. And those are important disagreements. Much turns on them at times. Our theological ideas matter; they matter a very great deal. But World Communion Sunday is a reminder to us that even as we passionately argue with our brothers and sisters about those beliefs, even as we contend over the best and right way to “do justice and love mercy,” we are commanded by Jesus never to let the bears get the better of us. Because Jesus' life and death and resurrection has made us all brothers and sisters, has made us all family. And what families do is sit down at the table together, saying *“Bears be gone, bears be gone.”* Because in this place, we all share the same family name, the name of Christ, the name “child of God.”

And on this World Communion Sunday and on every day, for that good news I say: Thanks be to God. Amen.