

“Finding Companions Beyond Our Corner”
October 1, 2023

Isaiah 66:18b-24
II Corinthians 1:1-7

In these early fall days, I continue to ask: “What’s happening on this corner?” because a lot is going on in this place. And what’s happening this morning, points to what’s happening in these days.

The two scripture lessons that we heard help us.

As the Book of Isaiah comes to an end, the prophet points our sight and our hope to the coming realm of God, telling us that God is “coming to gather all nations and tongues;” and they shall see the shining brightness of God. All people held in the love of God—if this is not yet visible, Isaiah suggests, keep looking. It will be as if there were a new creation, a new beginning for this old and tired world and its people, weary with hunger and warfare and chasing after all that does not give real life.

The steadfast love of God never ceases, God’s mercies never end; they are new every morning.

We remember the mercy of God, even in the worst situations, and we dare to move forward out of a sense that our lives—however brief or long, however filled with sadness or happiness, however wealthy or impoverished—our lives are lived in the presence of God who breathes the breath of life into each of us and all of us.

This is to say, we dare to look forward, we dare to hope.

At the same time, we listen when Paul speaks of suffering and affliction, because they are so familiar to us—in our lives, in our nation, in our world. Paul encourages us to look with hope at this suffering because of what is happening even now: God consoles us in our affliction. And more than that, when we share in the suffering of others, we also share in their consolation. We know something of this from feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, seeking economic and racial justice.

In mercy God does much more than help us to feel good again and get on with our lives as they always have been. God comforts us—that is, God gives us strength in adversity—so that we in turn might bring strength and consolation to others as God’s people in this weary world.

The mercy of God is an empowering force that calls us forward into God’s new creation. This mercy forgives us for the wrong that we have done. This mercy forgives us for the good that we have failed to do up to this point. And even more, it then lifts us up and turns us toward the new creation that God is bringing about, so that we might wait for the salvation of the Lord, the wholeness and well-being that God gives.

And all of this brings us back to what’s happening on this corner.

This morning on this corner we mark World Communion Sunday, as we have for decades in this place and as Protestant Christians have been doing for over eighty years.

Liberal Protestants proposed World Communion Sunday in the 1930's and encouraged its wider observance beginning in the 1940's—at a time of economic inequality and uncertainty, at a time when the whole world sensed a gathering cloud of tension between nations and peoples. World Communion Sunday developed in a time similar to our own. It continues to inform our faith in these days. On this day, we are invited to look, to *see* what we share with other Christians, with other people of faith, and really, with all people.

This celebration began with the great hope that Christians around the world would gather around their various and varied tables on this first Sunday in October, showing our unity in our diversity. It began with the great and still unrealized hope that the people of the world might live in peace with one another.

When we come to the Table today, our eyes are opened to see that, in the words of the hymn, “In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north.” We announce the reality—glimpsed occasionally but not always obvious—that we are one in Christ.

This day reminds us of the importance of the Lord's Supper for our life together.

This day reminds us of our connections with people of other denominations and traditions.

And because we can so easily forget, this day also reminds us of our connections with people in other nations, with different backgrounds, different lives, and different ways of following in the Way of Jesus Christ.

All people are our “companions”—literally, those with whom we eat bread.

When we eat and drink, we are connected with those who prepared the food, those who processed the food, those who grew the food, and the earth that produced the food.

When we eat and drink, we remember that the Creator God made known in Jesus is our friend, the one who desires our well-being and delight—and not ours alone, but the well-being and delight of all people.

Here on this corner, we find a table that in a small and particular way holds all of the gifts of God.

Here on this corner, we find a meal that in a small and particular way ends our separation from God and one another and also reconnects us with all creation.

Here on this corner we find food and drink that in a small and particular way offer the nourishment and joy needed that we might once again love our neighbors as ourselves and perhaps even come to love this great and fruitful planet that we have so threatened.

This food and drink and meal and table connect tell a particular story of the way in which God is bringing about the new creation through death and resurrection. They prepare us for the work that is still ours to do in these days of unraveling—weaving a new fabric of peace so that we might be a part of the realm of heaven that God is creating among all people.

World Communion Sunday, then, turns out to be far more important than we might ever have realized.

This table is where we begin the work of bringing peace into the world. This table is where we return again and again to be nurtured in that work, work that we are incapable of doing on our own strength.

God desires not only our good but also the good of all creation. And listen to that the other way. God desires the good of all creation—and God desires *your* good, yes, even *your own good*. There are signs of this often enough that we can dare to live in hope, we can choose to live in hope.

On these October Sundays, we're going to be looking at generosity from many angles. This morning we discover that when we are generous, we are not alone and we are not on our own. We are part of a world-wide community that bears one another's burdens.

This congregation on this corner is so important. But we don't live in isolation. We recognize this in the Congregational tradition as we emphasize that the life of faith lived together. We join together to support each other, to offer encouragement. And we are finding companions beyond this corner.

How else but together as Christ's church can we expect to make any difference in the world? This is how it happens in the church: one group sends money, another drives trucks filled with donations, another group arrives to serve meals, another group shows up to rebuild a house. In our Congregational independence we often overlook that we are connected—we are a *part* of a much larger *whole*—the body of Christ. It depends on us—but it doesn't *all* depend on us *alone*. We are generous together.

We who are many are one body. When we come again to the Lord's Table today, we come, as we do each time, as members of the one universal church. But perhaps today we come more consciously aware that we are not alone on our journey. We walk together with men and women, boys and girls who live in unknown places, in unfamiliar—often inhospitable—situations.

We come to the table together—and what do we find?

Wheat ground down and made into bread.

Grapes crushed into wine.

Signs of suffering. And in that affliction, we also see signs of the consolation and in-gathering of God—signs that in Christ, God has joined all of us in our sorrow and suffering and still promises to be faithful.

We come to the table, not because everything is all right, but because we hurt, because we know others suffer. It is with these companions beyond this corner that we ourselves are fed and strengthened for the days ahead.