

“A Common Faith of Many Beliefs”
2 Timothy 1: 1-14

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On World Communion Sunday we remind each other what is true every Sunday: that when we gather together as a church to worship and break bread together, we are connected in spirit and in faith with other churches who are gathering together in similar ways, all over the world. In the past few decades we have found ourselves living in a radically globalized world. This globalization is so encompassing that we no longer think twice about our local paper including international news, we expect our youth to study abroad and we welcome students from around the world into our homes. It makes sense that often on World Communion Sunday, we hold up the customs and elements of worship that capture the essence of our global world—incorporating different languages or perhaps drawing attention to customs of other Christian churches or cultures. World Communion Sunday is intended to honor and lift up the rich diversity in Christian traditions. However, we don't always have to go around the world, literally or symbolically, to capture that diversity. Last Saturday, I encountered it right here in Glastonbury, across town at First Church.

I should preface this by telling you that last Saturday afternoon I was not excited about going to any church, including First Church. I had been at a funeral that Saturday morning, and I was feeling lousy with a cold. On any other day I would have been eager to go to church, but that afternoon I would have much rather gone home and taken a nap. Instead, I went to First Church for a special worship service for the Installation of Connecticut's Conference Minister Kent Siladi. Since this is, after all, a day for New Member Orientation, I should explain that the Connecticut Conference is the body that represents all the UCC churches, like us, in the State. There are 38 Conferences around the country, each led by a Conference Minister who is the pastor, teacher and visionary leader for all of the area churches. Because there are only 38 Conference Ministers in the whole country, it's a big deal when

there is a new one being installed, or officially recognized. It's an even bigger deal when it is being held across town.

And even though it is a big deal, when you are congested and worn out, it's hard to make anything seem like a big deal. I'm telling you I wasn't excited about attending so that you know when I share what I want to say, you don't think I automatically loved it just because I'm a minister and that's what we do. I want you know that it wasn't my regular level of enthusiasm over the church. And, I want you to know: THAT WORSHIP SERVICE WAS THE MOST AWESOME AND SPIRITED WORSHIP SERVICE I HAVE BEEN TO IN A REALLY LONG TIME, MAYBE EVER. This worship service was the embodiment of world communion Sunday—it celebrated the diversity of our churches while maintaining the elements that united us as one body. The services began with the sounds of the Hot Cat Jazz Band and faded into African drumming. Organ and piano were intermixed with familiar hymns side by side with new ones. There were prayers in English, Spanish, Hungarian, scripture read in Korean, English, and Spanish. Our ecumenical partners from Columbia and Korea were present and in worship leadership. The worship was led by women and men, youth and adults, black, white, brown, gay and straight; I could go on and on. It was seamlessly woven together—many different voices joined together for one shared purpose, one hour of worship.

The most striking juxtaposition to me was between two Conference ministers who both participated. John Dorhauer from the Southwest Conference preached, and was followed shortly thereafter by Bela Poznan, the Bishop of the Calvin Synod. You need to know that The Calvin Synod is the only non-geographical conference in the UCC and it is a group of hungarian reformed congregations that form a loop of churches from Connecticut to Illinois. These Hungarian Reformed congregations are often orthodox, and in many ways feel as different as you can get from our congregation. And yet, they are still a part of the UCC. Needless to say, Conference Minister John Dorhauer preached a radically inclusive, wildly open and affirming of everyone, including LGBT folks, sermon. Open and Affirming is traditionally not something that the Calvin Synod has signed onto, and

as a whole have taken a stand against. But instead of taking advantage of the moment and offering a spontaneous counter sermon, or worse, storming out of the church, Bishop Bela Poznan took his turn at the microphone, and said a beautiful prayer in English and in Hungarian, seamlessly blending in with the other voices. And, it might have seemed like such a small thing, not to let political and theological positions divide us, but when I was sitting in the pews, my heart was overflowing with love and joy and awe that despite our different beliefs, our common faith was more important.

That is what church is about. And in that service, will all those different people and backgrounds and beliefs, we were practicing communion with one another—we were living out God's holy banquet in our community, right down the road. It struck such a cord with me so much that I kept expecting for someone to break bread and pass around a communion cup, because for all intensive purposes, we were practicing communion. By being in relationship and worshiping with one another, we were in communion together.

When we talk about all the diversity of the church, the elements like different languages and different rituals or different cultures are on the surface level of the differences that we have. They are the markers that point to differences that really challenge us. The difficult part of diversity is when we start talking about beliefs. What we believe in God and Jesus, how we understand them working in the world and in our lives, and what difference that makes to how we live. What happens if different beliefs do not align with each other? What happens when they seem to clash or conflict? When we look at other churches, or even other Christians, and we see the things that set us apart from each other, it makes it difficult to seek the things that also unite us.

The body of Christ encompasses churches all around the world—many that look and feel similar to us, and many more that do not. When we talk about the body of Christ, we are talking about all of them. The Catholics, the protestants, the Congregationalists, the Baptists, the Evangelicals, the Methodists, the Calvinists, the Presbyterians, the Quakers, the Episcopalians, the Lutherans, the Eastern Orthodox, and all the branches and congregations and denominations that shoot out from each of those.

It's a lot of people. And I have to tell you, we don't always agree. We look at God from unique lens, we bring our separate histories and traditions and experiences into the church, shaping how we worship and how we make meaning out of our lives. We have different doctrines, different focuses, and different ways of describing how we encounter the Holy and what it means to be a follower of Jesus of Nazareth. The body of Christ has as many parts and kinds of people as the world has.

Today's passage from 2 Timothy is an example of the diversity of the body of Christ. This reading is one man's testimony. It is a reflection of his personal faith. He says, "I am grateful to God...God gave us a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Grace was given to us in Jesus Christ..." As he continues, some readers might see moments when it diverts from how they would profess their faith; others might feel it is a reflection of their own beliefs. But it is Paul's beliefs, they are his to lift up and profess because he is as welcome in the body of Christ as any of us.

We talk about the body of Christ, we are talking about communion. The bread symbolizes Christ's body, and when we share that bread with each other, breaking off pieces so that there might be enough for anyone who wants some, we are symbolically acting out that we believe that we have more in common with our brothers and sisters than what separates us, and we believe that the things we have in common are what is most important. We believe that bread holds us together, that by eating with one another we are reminded of our common lot, regardless of our different beliefs. This applies to days like World Communion Sunday when we are thinking about our relationship with the wider Christian church, but it also applies every day at South Church.

We don't always name this, but we are a congregation with a lot of different beliefs. Some of us feel very comfortable claiming the label Christian and talking about our beliefs, some are really steeped in the traditions of Christianity but don't necessarily believe everything Christianity proclaims, and still others are still wrestling with what they believe, or others might claim a personal belief system that is more closely Unitarian, but love being a part of this particular Christian faith community. Once you start asking questions or talking with one another, you begin to realize that we are all over the

spectrum. And it is awesome. One of the things that I love about South Church is that when we talk about what we believe or why we are here—we get so many interesting, different answers. And they don't scare us. Many people will even say that it is the diversity of the community, and the freedom to be honest about where you are on your faith journey, that keeps drawing you to South Church.

South Church sent emails to 552 people on Friday morning—many of you received one. If you didn't get it for some reason, we can print it out for you in the office. With the weekly email we launched, we're hoping to give you more frequent updates on what is going on at South Church, hoping we might begin to feel a little more connected to this vibrant, busy community and all of its activities. As a part of this email, we are featuring a different South Church member, and are having them answer three questions. There is a twofold purpose to this. One is that we are a huge church, and we hope that over time this will become one way of putting a name to a face or helping you learn more about someone. It is also a reminder of the beautiful diversity of our community. The three questions will rotate and occasionally repeat themselves, but the answers will never be exactly the same. I predict that as people share what they love about this church or what it means to them to be a disciple, we will see similar themes that reappear again and again, but no two answers will be exact. No two perspectives will be the same. There is a freedom in acknowledging that we are all a little bit different. It is what makes life in community challenging because we can't take anything for granted, but it is also what makes it a gift. We have the opportunity to expand our own perspectives and beliefs by getting to know someone else and finding out about theirs.

On World Communion Sunday, and every other Sunday, the celebration of the diversity of the church and the body of Christ begins right here at home. Part of our covenant with each other is to welcome each other with openness and love, no who we are or where we are on life's journey or what we believe or don't believe. And that friends, is something to be celebrated.