

Hebrews 1:1-4a, 2:5-12 (The Message Bible) ~ Mark 10:13-16
Treat Them as Family

October 7, 2018 ~ World Communion Sunday Meditation
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As soon as I was old enough to know my colors, I was told firmly and definitively that having been born with red hair, I could *not* wear red. And forget about pink. Those colors were strictly off limits for me. I could wear blue and green and yellow, but don't even try on anything red. As a child I didn't really mind that arbitrary limitation. Department stores offered such a staggering number of choices and combinations, the "no red" boundary made clothes shopping a little easier. Anything red was strictly off limits. I was given a definite line never to cross.

There is a way in which boundaries and rules can be comforting to us. They tell us where we belong and where we don't. If we know exactly where our property line is, we know where we can stop mowing the grass. We know where our responsibility ends. Not our property, not our concern. We don't have to worry about the brown spots in our neighbor's lawn, or about the family in distress down the street. Nor about the 4300 families whose homes were destroyed or damaged by Hurricane Florence, in New Bern, North Carolina. Nor are the nearly 500 migrant children who still remain in U.S. government-funded shelters without their parents, really our concern. Not our family. Not our problem. We have enough to worry about right here.

What about the children across the oceans, is it "to such as *these* that the kingdom belongs"? We really have to draw the line somewhere. But where? Our bulletin insert tells us about the true story of a 13-year old Nigerian boy named Princeton who was snatched by soldiers and taken to a military training camp. Two weeks later, he was carrying a gun as a soldier in Nigeria's civil war. "I was going to fetch water for my mom when they grabbed me, and I didn't see my family again for two and a half years," he says. Princeton was wounded while attempting to defuse an unexploded rocket. After six surgeries his broken body was healed, it took even longer for his broken spirit to be transformed. We know about Princeton because his life was saved and his outcome gives us hope.¹ So many other children snatched up by violent gangs right here in the US, are trafficked or killed before they ever have a chance to grow up.

Can any of us forget the image of Alan Kurdi's body, the three-year old Syrian toddler washed up on the edge of a Turkish beach in 2015? His family, like thousands of others, so desperately seeking a livable life with no way forward except a rickety, unsafe, overcrowded boat.

Just a week ago Friday, the earthquake and tsunami on the Island of Sulawesi, in Indonesia took 1,558 souls, and the death count is still rising. A mom, who survived named Hasnah, 44 years old, has trouble even remembering all of the dead relatives she is trying to find in the tangled expanse of mud and debris that used to

be her neighborhood. "More than half of my family are gone," she said as she sobbed. "I can't even count how many. Two of my children are gone, my cousins, my sister, my brother in law and their children, all gone."ⁱⁱ Is it "to such as *these* that the kingdom belongs"? These people live on the other side of the world—surely they are beyond the borders of our concern.

Perhaps, unless we want to come to *this* Table. This is the Lord's Table. Yes, our Lord, who "perfectly mirrors God, stamped with God's nature" who endured the excruciating pain of a very human death. Jesus felt the pain of not only his own torturous death on the cross, but *every* time a person of any color: "red and yellow, black and white" suffers pain. Every time a child "such as these" is hurt or killed. Our Lord, who doesn't hesitate to treat everyone as family. Yes, that Jesus, invites everyone to his supper, the Lord's Supper. Who might be sitting next to you at this Table? As you look at the people seated next to you and across the table, you may ask are they really family to us?

Remember in Jesus' parable of judgment in the 25th chapter of Matthew, the words of Supreme Judge Jesus sitting on his Throne of Glory: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are *members of my family*, you did it to me." (My emphasis.) "Members of my family" is how he identifies those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, strangers, ill, and imprisoned. Think about it: if we come to the Lord's Table, if we choose to trust in the miracle and mystery of God's grace, Christ compels us to cross the boundaries we set as we define family, or "them and us." If we take this bread, and drink this cup, we are sharing the cup of the One who made the ultimate boundary crossing by taking on human flesh: God, with two eyes that got bleary with tears; two feet that got tired, dusty, and dirty. A whole body that got broken. Why? To save humanity, from our narrow, boundaried, constricted view; to open our vision, open our hearts: one morsel of bread, one splash of wine at a time to Jesus' definition of family.

If we accept this miracle, if we choose to become disciples of the One who wore every color, becoming or not, then we are saying "yes" to crossing over the boundaries of self-interest, the boundaries of privilege, and of a single, static world-view. If we say "yes", border crossing becomes our daily business. What am I talking about? Consider the borders Jesus crossed throughout his life: He ate with people considered unclean, he treated women as people rather than property, he broke rules to heal the sick, and busted open the definition of neighbor to include everyone or any race, religion, or station in life, all over the world. He showed us how to "treat *them* as family."

As we prepare to come to this Table, today, I hear Jesus asking us a hard question to answer honestly: who is the person, or the group of people on the other side of your border right now? Here in the U.S. the divides and polarities in our neighborhoods, our precincts, our prisons, and our courtrooms are widening—and wounding us all. Who do we find the most difficult to understand? With whom are most angry? What person or group of persons are we the quickest to dismiss or

disdain? The answers are different for each of us. Whoever comes to your mind right now, I hear Jesus asking you to bring that person or group of people with you to the Table in prayer.

As O. Wesley Allen Jr, United Methodist Professor of Homiletics and author has written, “Many of us in the church “feel” the need to claim that we hate no one, that we have no enemies. But we can’t love our enemies unless we admit that we have them. However, the real enemy is evil itself—oppression and hatred that infuse humanity. This infusion means that evil is an incarnate reality, just as are love, hope, mercy, and grace.”ⁱⁱⁱ And here, at this Table, we believe that Love wins over evil incarnate.

One late summer afternoon my nephew Ryan, when he was about 8 years old, did something very bad. He threw his baseball into my brother and sister-in-law’s expensive sliding glass French doors and shattered it. My brother, his dad, was not home at the time, so Ryan had several hours to wait and wait and get more and more scared about what kind of trouble he would be in for breaking the rules and shattering the glass door. He stayed in his room longer than his timeout required. Well when my brother finally came home from work, there sits Ryan with a large carefully rendered sign that read: “Hate the sin, love the sinner.” This is funny in this context, of a boy, a baseball and a glass window. But this is fiercely difficult and a serious call to faith, if the person is politician, a judge, or a political party that we happen to believe is behaving sinfully. We must find ways to love the sinners who have been constructed in the way they have, and hate the sin that has done the constructing.^{iv} This is how we can incarnate the “Love Wins” strategy.

Here in this place, we can choose grace, again. Grace overcame evil on the Third Day. Here in this place, we can be honest about our struggle to even engage in civil conversation with “the other” party, whichever that might be for you. That was the struggle of the First century Jewish Community to whom the Letter of Hebrews was addressed. They weren’t ready to give up the old laws, the old boundaries, which told them what to do and who to care about, Engaging in a direct relationship with the Risen Christ was threatening for them. It is threatening for us as, as well. We’d rather be told what colors to wear, where the boundaries of our concern can be drawn. Jesus fought his whole life to move his disciples beyond a life driven by rigid rules and regulations.

Our gospel reading this morning tells us that Jesus was “indignant” when the disciples attempted to keep the children away from him. Jesus challenges us to be indignant when we see others who are vulnerable (for any reason) be crushed or ignored by artificial boundaries. Or by socially constructed distinctions, arbitrary distinctions such as race. Here in this place, we can work on this border crossing together. Consider participating in our Adult Forum that begins next Sunday, where we will study together “The Reality and Illusion of Race,” from the false biological distinctions to the very real political borders that bind us and blind us, according to race.

I will conclude this communion meditation with a color palate shift, from the “red and yellow, black and white” of all God’s people, to Navy Blue, Metallic Gold, and White. Yes, the colors of our winning Milwaukee Brewers, up 2-0 in the Division NL Central series against the Colorado Rockies. How can they help us live into our Gospel lesson today? Well, this may be a stretch (7th inning stretch?) but here goes. In addition to being a basically amazing baseball team, they have engaged in a pitching strategy somewhere late in the season called, “the opener.” Rather than depending one star starting pitcher to be the key player to set the team on a winning course to the 6th inning, letting middle or late relievers finish the game, the Brewers shifted to a more cooperative pitching strategy. They let Anderson, Chacin, Gonzalez, Davies or Miley “get the ball rolling” so to speak, then in concert with Burnes, Hader, Jeffress, and Knebel: they keep the bats silent and bring in the wins. Baseball is a team sport; we knew that. But even the pitching works better with each person doing his part and then giving the ball to the next player. We hope the Brewers take it all the way and win the World Series. However whether they do or not, we already know, thanks to Christ Jesus, that Love Wins ultimately. Why wait?

Each of us and all of them are given a place at the Table by God’s grace. Jesus is just asking us to treat them all as family.

ⁱ Peace & Global Witness Special Offering materials, 12142-18-284, Presbyterian Church(USA).

ⁱⁱ Reuters, Associate Press

ⁱⁱⁱ O. Wesley Allen Jr, *Preaching in the Era of Trump*, (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2017), 42.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 38-39.