

What God Has Joined Together

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

World Communion Sunday, October 1, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC

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Last month I had the wonderful opportunity to officiate at a wedding on Church Island. It was absolutely beautiful! The bride and groom are two physicians from New York, and they are obviously very much in love. The bride's family has a summer cabin on Squam Lake, and she grew up with Church Island as part of her world, so of course that is where she wanted to be married. She wore a gorgeous lace gown, and she made her way to the island that day in an antique wooden boat, driven by an old family friend.

In contrast, the wedding party arrived at the boat dock in Molly the Trolley. The bridesmaids all wore lovely navy chiffon gowns, and they generously took turns spraying each other with mosquito repellent as we waited for the groom and his attendants to arrive. The groomsmen wore blue suits with little matching pocket squares, folded in perfect pleats. We gave the bride a good head start, so the groom wouldn't see her yet, and then we rode to the island together on one of the Squam Lake Science Center boats. The weather was predicted to be stormy, but the clouds held off, and we had an absolutely gorgeous day for the ceremony.

I don't know if you have ever been to Church Island. There is no church building there. Rather, there are a bunch of primitive pews sitting among the trees, facing a huge cross made of birch logs, and on a clear day, you can see Mt. Chocorua in the distance behind the cross. The pulpit is just a big, oddly shaped rock. There is a little hut that protects a crank organ and another hut for storage; and there is a bell tower, where newly married couples ring the bell to announce that they are wed. For this wedding, the aisle was laid with a burlap runner, and the bride and her attendants carried bouquets that looked like wild flowers, though I am sure a florist spent many hours making them look quite so casual.

We didn't have an organist. The couple chose instead a string quartet to provide the music for their ceremony. Because there were seven bridesmaids, the space for the musicians was sort of crammed into the trees and bushes. They managed in good spirits, but it was a little more of a nature experience than I think they wanted. I am sad to report that a bee stung the hand of the cellist as they were playing the prelude. She chilled the bite by sticking her finger into her water bottle, and then she bravely soldiered on, playing a cello solo by Bach as the groom walked down the aisle with his parents. Then there was a brief pause, and we heard the beautiful strains of Pachelbel's Canon in D, the cue for the bride and her parents to enter. Despite the intrusions of nature, that string quartet made this a very classy affair.

The wedding service itself was fairly traditional. After the declaration of their love for one another, their vows for the future, and the exchange of rings, I had the joyous responsibility of declaring that they were wed, and then I said what clergy have been saying for centuries: "Those whom God has joined together, let no one separate."

God has joined you together, we declared. You made your promises to one another, but it is God who has made you one this day. Let no one mess with that.

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Today's scripture is from St. Paul's letter to the fractious church in Corinth, the ones who can't get their act together to treat each other as equals in God's sight, the church where there was a lot of sexual

indiscretion going on, and where the rich folks would show up early for a full meal while the poor folks had to wait outside and then receive only a morsel from the communion table, or none at all. The Corinthians. THAT church. And Paul, who founded this church and then moved on to found other churches in other cities, writes back to Corinth to tell them to shape up. Cut. It. Out.

Paul begins, "I speak as to sensible people..." I love that. I'm going to write this as though you were sensible (though it is pretty clear that you are not). You can almost hear him mutter under his breath.

Then Paul gives us this beautiful description of Communion which the choir sang for us, and which Su read so well: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body," This meal doesn't just symbolize our unity. It actually makes us one body in Christ.

One bread, one body, one Lord of all. Paul is saying to the Corinthians exactly what I said to the bride and groom on Church Island: What God has joined together, let no one separate. Or, it is God who made you one this day. Let no one mess with that.

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We Christians have found plenty of ways to separate from one another over the centuries. The Church Universal split into the Roman Catholic church and the Eastern Orthodox church in 1054 over the question of whether the Holy Spirit comes from God the Father, or if the Spirit comes from both the Father and the Son. Protestants split from Catholics over the question of the Pope's authority to forgive sins, and also over the presence of organs and religious art in churches, which some protestants considered idolatrous. There was a great smashing of irreplaceable art and windows in that period, and we are all the worse off because of that part of the Reformation. The American Civil War split Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians into northern and southern denominations. Black and White Christians still worship separately, mostly. In 1960, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. declared that 11:00 on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. Today, the United Methodists are un-uniting over the question of whether God loves folk who are gay or transgender.

We find so many ways to separate this one body of Christ, and whenever we split from one another, people on both sides earnestly believe that they are right, that they have heard God's voice confirming what they already believe. It is a lesson in humility, I think, all this earnestness on both sides, this certainty that how I see the world is the only way to see it, this unwillingness for God to do a new thing, even though God has been doing new things since the Creation of heaven and earth.

Today is World Communion Sunday, the one day each year when we say, "Enough of everything that keeps us apart." We know we have differences. We speak different languages. We observe different rituals that are deeply meaningful to us. We sing different songs. We believe different things on issues that seem crucially important. But we are all called to be the one body of Christ in a hurting world. This table unites us, not only with our Lord, and with the company of saints, but also with believers around the world. We all come to this table as hungry souls, and we are all fed here.

One bread. One body. One Lord of all. What God has joined together, let no one separate.

Amen