

Reuniting Old Friends
July 3, 2011
I Corinthians 10:14-17

I Corinthians 10:14-17 – The Message

So, my very dear friends, when you see people reducing God to something they can use or control, get out of their company as fast as you can. I assume I'm addressing believers now who are mature. Draw your own conclusions: When we drink the cup of blessing, aren't we taking into ourselves the blood, the very life, of Christ? And isn't it the same with the loaf of bread we break and eat? Don't we take into ourselves the body, the very life, of Christ? Because there is one loaf, our many-ness becomes one-ness - Christ doesn't become fragmented in us. Rather, we become unified in him. We don't reduce Christ to what we are; he raises us to what he is.

Let us pray . . . Holy God you are bigger and wiser than we acknowledge; help us to avoid the temptation to remake you into our image. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

Let me begin with a story . . . ¹

“Once there were 3 friends who grew up together. . . . their lives were intertwined in play, at school . . . and in their dreaming. Their relationship made them inseparable.

. . . At college they shared a rich intellectual and social life and . . . they would talk at length, sharing their hearts, listening to each other's dreams, and making plans to change the world. . . . Their relationship was their strength; it shaped their identities.

. . . when they grew older, they gradually moved apart. . . . They would still connect by phone and internet . . . but the long conversations became rare events.

Every few years they'd meet for a weekend, and then it was as if they'd never been apart. . . . Then one day . . . two of the friends received email from the third. . . . The third friend invited them to spend a weekend at his home . . .

¹ Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 31-33.

. . . The evening began with catching up about family and jobs. . . . But sometime during the evening the atmosphere changed . . . An unspoken awkwardness set in as if two sets of in-laws-to-be were meeting each other for the first time . . .

The host began doing the talking and it was all about himself. Each time the friends spoke, the host cut them off and turned the conversation back to his life, his questions, and his needs. . . . He mined them for information that would make him look better. He seemed preoccupied with how to become more successful.

. . . What had happened? How could their friend have become so self-absorbed?"

This engaging story is actually a parable created and told many times by Alan Roxburgh, a leader in the missional church movement. He explains² that, in his parable, the three friends are the Bible, the culture, and the church.

For many hundreds of years they grew together. While there were times one was more dominant than the others, they were always connected. But . . . In recent years, the three have gone their own ways. Now, whenever they come together the church always wants center stage.

Roxburgh puts it this way: "The only questions the church asks of the culture are church questions: How do I get information and data about this culture to make the church successful? And when the church comes to the biblical narratives it is only there to ask church questions . . .

We're so preoccupied with church questions that neither biblical narratives nor culture can become places where God addresses us and challenges us . . ."

I believe there must be a better way. So, on this holiday weekend when all of us have chosen to gather to hear the Bible read, when many are thinking about our nation, and when thousands in our United Church of Christ are gathered together to "Imagine What's Possible," it seems appropriate to consider restoring the relationship of these three old friends.

² Ibid., 47-48.

First, we must revisit the nature of the church's relationship with our lifelong friend culture.

For most of my life, America has been engaged in a war within its own borders. These culture wars were most intense during the 80s and 90s when our nation was divided over issues that included abortion, guns, and the separation of church and state. The term "culture wars" was popularized in large measure as a result of the book by that name written by the University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter some 20 years ago.³ In that book, Hunter noted that people were choosing sides in the culture wars not based on religion, political affiliation, or socioeconomic status, but rather based on ideology or world view.

We have now all lived through the first decade of a new millennium and experienced a shift in our culture. In light of this change, Hunter recently wrote a new book, *To Change the World*,⁴ which calls us to reconsider how we understand power and proposes what he believes to be the best way forward for Christians.

Hunter suggests that we adopt a perspective he calls "faithful presence within culture," which is supported by "a theology of engagement in and with the world around us."⁵ Faithful presence takes us far from our current selfishness by calling us to be "fully present to each other within the community of faith and fully present to those who are outside it as well, to be fully present and committed to our tasks, and to be fully present and committed in our spheres of social influence, whatever they may be - families, neighborhoods, voluntary activities and places of work."⁶

As we adopt a new way of engaging culture that cares for all, much as Jesus envisioned, the church will no longer exist only for itself and its own interests.

Second, we must revisit the nature of the church's relationship with our lifelong friend the Bible.

³ James Davison Hunter. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

⁴ James Davison Hunter. *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 242-247

The religious right has sought to make their version of Christianity the only authorized American version. In response, increasing numbers of people have decided that kind of religion and the religious text upon which it is based are no longer relevant or meaningful.

For those not ready to give up just yet, the well-known progressive Christian scholar and prolific author Marcus Borg offers a way forward that allows people to both engage their minds and experience the Christian faith.

Last year he wrote his first novel: *Putting Away Childish Things*.⁷ It is a story about moving from a rules-based religion to a living faith and from a Christianity that offers all the answers to one that embraces paradox and multiple possibilities.

This year, Borg wrote about the same topic in a more direct manner in *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored*⁸. The title may be familiar as it has appeared in our bulletin many times and Pastor Ron has been leading a study of it. In this book, Borg seeks to redeem rather than replace Christian language. He provides a pathway that enables us to move beyond both the heaven and hell framework and literalism.

As we adopt new ways of returning to the Biblical text and redeeming Biblical language we open ourselves to the possibility of encountering a Still Speaking God – a much larger God who invites us into relationship.

Finally, we must look within & be reminded of what church is.

How do we break free of the illusion that the church exists for its own and looks elsewhere only to find ways to strengthen itself? While there are many answers, my experience has been that the table offers the best starting point.

Over and over, the table has been the place where I have experienced the church and those within it leave behind self-interest and seek to know and be nourished by the divine.

I can still remember a pastor from my youth saying, “This table does not belong to this church or to a denomination; it is the Lord’s table.”

⁷ Marcus J. Borg. *Putting Away Childish Things: A Tale of Modern Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

⁸ Marcus J. Borg. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – and How They Can Be Restored* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

I can still remember going forward to receive communion as a young adult, receiving a piece of bread from someone fifty years my senior then bending down to dip the bread into a cup held by a child's hands.

I can still remember trying to craft the most inclusive invitation to the table that my limited language would allow as I found my way in my first parish after graduating from seminary. My own inadequate words were always followed by the words of Jesus who provides the most extravagant welcome of all: "I am the bread of life. She who comes to me shall never hunger; he who believes in me shall never thirst."

Today we have the opportunity to create a new memory as we hear once again the invitation to come and to believe. May our responses show that we are people committed to acting as agents of God's reconciling love – a love capable of reuniting old friends. Amen.