

**“There Are No Strangers Here”**  
Reverend Bill Gause  
Overbrook Presbyterian Church  
27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
October 6, 2019

**First Scripture Reading: 1st Corinthians 10:15-18 (The Message)**

<sup>15-18</sup>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. That’s basically what happened even in old Israel—those who ate the sacrifices offered on God’s altar entered into God’s action at the altar.

**Second Scripture Reading: Galatians 3:23-29**

<sup>23</sup>Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. <sup>24</sup>Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. <sup>25</sup>But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, <sup>26</sup>for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup>As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.



**Sermon: “There Are No Strangers Here”**

Last month, Mary and I celebrated our 20<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Like most couples who’ve been together that long, we’ve had plenty of interesting things happen over that time and we’ve more than enough stories to bore our kids with until they have kids of their own ... who we can also bore.

On our first actual, official date, Mary and I went to a restaurant owned by Wallace Beason, one of her friends who was a member of the church she was serving at that time. It was a busy Friday night and as we stood waiting for a table, Wallace came over and asked us if we might be willing to do him a favor. A line was starting to develop at the door, and he wanted to get as many people seated as he could. The only table he had available was a big one that would normally seat eight people. So, instead of a cozy table for two, would we mind sitting at the end of that table and sharing it with another party?

Mary wanted to be a good friend and after all, how tough would it be to share a table with another couple, as long as they were seated at the other end and minded their own business? So, in the interest of helping out, we agreed. And that is how we came to spend our first date dining with a young couple and their two-year-old toddler.

At a time when you would want everything to be as normal as possible, better, actually; we found ourselves in a very *abnormal* situation. And I say “abnormal” because eating with strangers is not something most people do very much. If you think about it, usually when you sit down at a table to eat a meal, it’s with friends or family or colleagues. Sometimes you have a business lunch or a blind date where you eat with a stranger, but those meetings are arranged and purposeful. Rarely do we ever just sit down at table with someone we don’t already know. Mary and I walked into a restaurant the other day and there were only three other people in the place. And all three were sitting at their own tables, eating alone. Wonder what would happen if they all decided to eat together? What would have happened had Mary and I invited them to eat with us?

I don’t usually mind eating alone. But sometimes I feel self-conscious about it. As if people are judging me. “Look at that guy. Poor sap doesn’t have any friends to eat with.” I usually bring along a book or a newspaper or I pull out my phone as if to say “you know, I could be eating with someone else today, I do have friends and all, but I just don’t have time. I’m just really busy with all this reading I have to do ... and these candies, well, they’re not going to crush themselves.”

But thankfully some people have more courage than I do. You probably don’t know Lisa Meilander, and truth is, neither do I. But she shared a story on the internet that’s worth repeating. Lisa Meilander was dining at the Eat-n-Park in Belle

Vernon, Pennsylvania when she noticed an elderly gentleman sitting in a booth by himself. In a post on Facebook that was verified by several news outlets<sup>1,2</sup> Ms. Meilander tells her story:

*"We really didn't see him come in. But we did notice when our server, Dylan, dropped to one knee to look him eye-to-eye as he got ready to take his order. The man apologized for not hearing too well. He had forgotten to put in his hearing aids. He talked about how he lost his hearing during his time in the war. He was 91 years old with many stories to tell. Dylan patiently listened, giving him his full attention. Eventually the man apologized for talking so much. "I'm alone now," he said, "and I don't often have someone to talk to." Dylan smiled and said he enjoyed listening. He then helped him figure out what to order and left to take it to the kitchen... After the man received his food Dylan came back to say he was on a break. He asked if he could sit with the gentleman as he ate. As we left the restaurant the two of them were conversing... It was a touching sight."*<sup>3</sup>

Sure, an older gentleman; a veteran, he sounds like a sympathetic figure straight out of central casting. But everyone has a story to tell, if someone will only listen. And everyone is a sympathetic figure if you see them in the right light. Maybe when you see someone eating alone, they're really busy and just don't have time to visit. But it could also be that they're just really lonely.

What Dylan did was pretty amazing, actually. But it was also a little bit of a risk. You see, when we eat with family or friends or co-workers, we're coming together with members of our tribe. There are lots of reasons why we don't approach strangers and invite them to sit at our tables, but I think one of them is our over-arching concern and mistrust of strangers. We don't know who they are, and we don't know what to expect. What if they hold different political beliefs or theological beliefs or God forbid, what if they cheer for the wrong team? What if they have nothing to talk about? Or worse, what if they have *too much* to talk about? Nope, better the solitude we know than the togetherness we don't.

But the Apostle Paul writes that in Christ, the barriers that divide us, barriers of faith and ideology and identity are broken down. There are no strangers here. The tribes we call home are actually one tribe; one broad and inclusive family of God. And in that family, there is room for everybody. That's what Paul was talking about here in his letter to the Galatians. At the time Paul is writing, Christianity is still mainly a sect of Judaism. So, there is a little division between Jewish Christians who have always kept Jewish law, and gentile Christians; new converts to the faith who have never kept the Jewish laws. Paul writes Galatians to address this dispute over whether new converts should also observe the law of Moses.

Paul argues that righteousness (or right relationship with God) is not based on how well people keep the law of Israel, "but on God's promise and it's fulfillment through the death of Jesus Christ. Paul consistently argues that it is God's gracious act in reaching out to us that sets us free from sin and death, not our own actions in meticulously observing the law of Moses. Yet there were many who disagreed with him. In Galatians Paul tells of a meeting in which he was called to Jerusalem to stand before the leaders of the church and explain himself. Some supported his teachings, but others stood against him.

Division can be a nasty thing, especially in the church. We live in a society that is often divided along ideological and political rifts that seem like uncrossable chasms, a situation exacerbated by people who see in this divisiveness an opportunity to gain power and privilege. But Paul teaches that in Christ we are one. There is no longer Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, for all of us are one in Christ Jesus. Which doesn't mean we have to agree on everything. It means that our disagreements do not change the fundamental truth that we are all a part of the family of God. In the church of Jesus Christ, our labels, our tribal identities, our divisions become secondary to our corporate identity as members of the Body of Christ.

Celebrating communion is an expression of that truth. No matter where you are from, or what language you speak, or what your race or gender or sexuality; no matter how much money you have or what you believe or what news channel you watch, when we come to the table we are coming together as Christ's body, bound together as a family of the children of God. There are no strangers here. We are sitting down to eat with one another; we are sharing a meal at Christ's table.

Yes, communion *is* a physical re-enactment of the Lords Supper when, on the night he was arrested, Jesus sat at table with his disciples and fellow travelers and celebrated an even older event of significance, the Passover of God. But at its heart, communion is a community meal. When we eat the bread and drink of the cup, we do so not as individuals or members of any group, but as members of God's family; we do so recognizing that the people next to us in the pew or behind us in

the intinction line are just as much sinners as we are, and that they are just as much children of God as we are, too. As we eat and drink, we do so recognizing our connections with God and all of God's people everywhere in the world. There are no strangers here.

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. On this day, Christians all over the world will gather to worship God and to celebrate the Lords Supper. As we take the bread and cup, we will do so knowing that millions of Christians all over the world are doing the same thing today. Christians in places like Ghana, and Korea, and Sri Lanka, and Niger will celebrate the Lord's Supper with us and we, with them. And while we are not gathered physically together in one space, in a very real sense we are all gathered at table in the presence of God.

Reverend Donald Kerr, a Presbyterian pastor and the son of the man who began World Communion Sunday has said this about its observance:

“When we all share the Meal where Christ is our Host, we are connected in ways that go beyond our personal preferences, or theological scuffles, as well as transcending boundaries of geography and language. What we find on World Communion Sunday is a dissolving of those things that might hurt or divide us. Around His Table together, we broadcast our faith to the world and say, "Come and dine; there is room for all!"<sup>4</sup>

As we come to the table this morning, we may not know the story of every person eating with us; we may not know what they believe or what they're struggling with right now; we may not even know all their names, but we do know that each of us is a member of the family of God.

There are no strangers here and that means at Christ's table, we never have to eat alone.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Gable, Kym. "Belle Vernon Eat 'N Park Server's Act of Kindness Goes Viral." CBS Pittsburgh, 18 Aug. 2019, [pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/08/18/belle-vernon-eat-n-park-server](http://pittsburgh.cbslocal.com/2019/08/18/belle-vernon-eat-n-park-server).

<sup>2</sup> "EAT'N PARK SERVER: Local veteran, Eat'n Park server share heartwarming moment." WPXI, 20 Aug. 2019, [www.wpxi.com/news/top-stories/local-veteran-eat-n-park-server-share-heartwarming-moment1/977365135](http://www.wpxi.com/news/top-stories/local-veteran-eat-n-park-server-share-heartwarming-moment1/977365135).

<sup>3</sup> "Lisa Meilander - The elderly gentleman was seated in the booth." 4 Oct. 2019, [www.facebook.com/lisa.shearer.meilander/posts/10215541782162981](https://www.facebook.com/lisa.shearer.meilander/posts/10215541782162981).

<sup>4</sup> Dalles, John A. "Presbyterian Origins - World Wide Communion Sunday." *WekiviaPresbyterian.Org*. Wekivia Presbyterian Church, n.d. Web. 05 Oct. 2015. <[http://www.wekivapresbyterian.org/articles/presbyterian\\_origins.htm](http://www.wekivapresbyterian.org/articles/presbyterian_origins.htm)>.