

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

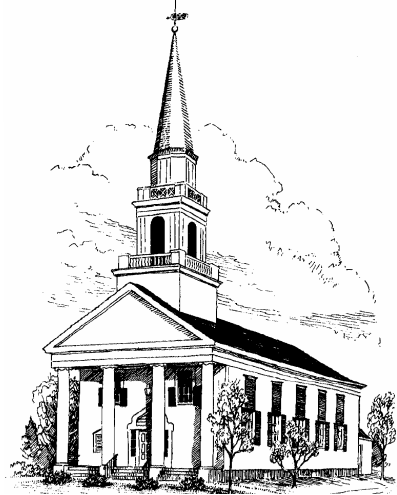
Sermon from November 1, 2009

All Saints Day/World Communion Sunday

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Fading Photos, Fading Borders”

*Based on Sermon Sent to Korean Partner Church
on October 4, 2009*



Scriptures:

Ephesians 1:15-23 Luke 24:13-35

This past September, as Kathy Kerns, our Children’s Ministries Director, was preparing our classrooms for the restart of our Sunday School year, she came across a box of photographs of our children from previous years. At first glance, each child might as well have been a stranger! Who are these kids? Maybe they’re children from another church! The backs of the photos were blank, giving no clues as to the children’s names or ages or even what year the photo was taken. But as we carefully laid them out on the table, peering at each child in their various stages of development, from braces on teeth to outdated hairstyles, each one’s identity began to emerge. There was something about her smile or the curve of his mouth or her unmistakable nose or the color of his eyes. One by one we delighted in recognizing these children, some of whom were now parents in our congregation with children of their own! Each time one of us examiners hit upon a recognition and shouted out the child’s name, the others who were gathered around the table joyously recognized the child, too, exclaiming, “Yes! That’s him! Now I know who it is!” These children were not strangers after all, but cherished people still in our midst, grown into the next phase of their lives.

In today’s scripture we find Cleopas and his friend in a similar situation. In their grief and disillusionment, they have left Jerusalem, the site of Jesus’ crucifixion and death, and they’re walking on the road toward the village of Emmaus. Jesus himself joins them on the road, but he might as well have been a complete stranger. Not just a stranger to them, but apparently a stranger to the events of the entire past week. He listens to their disappointment and confusion at the tomb’s emptiness and reminds them of the fulfillment of the scripture; and, while accompanying them on their seven-mile journey, he interprets for them everything in all the scriptures, from Moses on through all the prophets.

They probably walked together for about three hours, Cleopas and his friend listening to Jesus retell the Hebrew Scriptures, perhaps interrupting now and again to ask him a question, or request clarification. They listened to his voice, observed his face, his gait, and his hand gestures as he told them about Moses and Aaron and Elijah and Samuel and Isaiah and Micah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Was there something about him then? We read that their hearts were burning. Were their hearts burning with longing? Were their hearts burning with a familiarity which they could not identify? Were their hearts burning with a new understanding?

Whatever they were feeling in their hearts, they did not want this man, this stranger who was opening the scriptures to them, to go on without them. “Stay with us.” They urged him strongly not to go, stay with us, much like any one of us would do when we wanted to hear more, when we didn’t want this connection to end. Stay with us. It’s getting dark. The day’s almost over. You might as well stay here with us.

And they sat down at the table to eat together. We read: “When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.” That was him! Now I recognize him! But *unlike* the way

the people in our church recognized our children from years gone by—by their smiles or eye color or the familiar tilt of their heads—Cleopas and his friend recognized Jesus in his breaking of the bread. He was made known to them in the way he picked up the loaf and blessed it just the way Jesus always had: when he gave it to the disciples to distribute it to the five thousand, when he gave it to them the night before he died. Now I know who that was! And they got up in that same hour and *walked back* the seven miles to Jerusalem to tell the rest what had happened. We thought he was a stranger, but as soon as he broke that bread, we knew who he was!

As Christians have been doing for the past two thousand years, today, here and all over the world, we will all break bread again and give it to each other just as Jesus did. The Communion table is the easiest place to recognize Jesus, but on this Communion Sunday, this All Saints Day, I invite you to examine with me the many places and the many faces to which our eyes have been closed. Yes, it is easy to recognize Jesus at the Communion table, but where on *our* roads do we miss him? Where do we dismiss him as nothing but a stranger? On *our* way from one place to another, when do we not recognize him walking alongside?

The Korean people know too well about separation, living in a country split in two for nearly sixty years, whole families split and separated by an impassable border. We encounter separation in all forms in our world, separation that hurts us, that keeps us from truly being one body in Christ. Our own country, the United States, still struggles with separation around issues of race, of new immigrants, of poverty. We have erected fences at our borders, and gates and walls around our affluent communities, and invisible barriers in our institutions. Yet, separation is not specific only to Korea or to the United States: the world's people are separated—by AIDS in Africa, hunger in India, violence and unrest in parts of South America, and deep divides in the Middle East. As Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians: If one member of the body suffers, all suffer together with it.

Yet, when we make our way to the Communion table, our separation disappears. I love telling the story of the Christian pastor at a church in a border town along the US-Mexican border. Many of you have heard me tell it before. His congregation consisted of both undocumented Mexican migrant workers, considered “illegal” in the United States, and American citizens, many of whom worked for the United States Border Patrol, in charge of picking up, detaining and returning Mexicans who were in the U.S. “illegally”. The pastor held the immigration status and occupations of his congregation in his heart. After a particularly violent week in this border town, one Sunday, this pastor witnessed a moment during the distribution of Communion when an undocumented migrant worker tenderly handed the bread of life to the border patrol agent. Body of Christ.

At the Communion table we meet the same people with whom we disagreed at last night's church committee meeting. We meet the ones whose politics are not our own. We meet the ones whose musical choices we find difficult to embrace. We meet the people who think the best way is the old way. And we meet the people who think *any* way is better than the old way.

And we meet Jesus. We meet the Son of God whom we did not recognize in our midst the rest of the week at work, or on the evening news, or on the street, but *who forgives us and welcomes us at his table anyway*. We recognize Jesus at this table, and all the tables like it all over the world, whether it is in a tent or an immense brick building, outside in the open or under cover in the dark. We recognize Jesus at this table, no matter how big or how small the gathering, no matter what kind of bread we serve or how we serve it. This is where we see him in the faces gathered. This is where we remember him. This is where we long for the day when there will be no more separation and we will see him again. This is where we are reminded once more that we are one in his body, in his Spirit.

On this Communion Sunday, dear partners in Korea and dear brothers and sisters here in these pews, may we together envision our world, God's world, in communion, recognizing Jesus for who he is and recognizing the things that separate us for what they are: designed by humans, constructed by humans, maintained by humans. May we envision our fences breaking, our walls crumbling and our gates lifting. May we keep our eyes on the day when we recognize all people as beloved children of God, wonderfully and uniquely made, one in his body, one in his Spirit. Amen.