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“Re-membering at the Table”

World Communion Sunday is one of the Sundays I look forward to the most in the Christian Church Year. It's a day for us to at least imagine what it would look like if we set aside that which divides us and let peace and unity reign.

Today, Christians all over the world are being fed at the Lord's table. This table is a celebration of our shared humanity, bound together by what we have in common despite our differences. Here, we are reminded that each has a place, are radically loved, and have belonging.

We are reminded that this table is spread not just for our Christian siblings but for everyone. That may challenge us a bit. But this is not the church's table. When we say it is the Lord's Table, we speak of how wide and long it has to be, however messy the meal, to feed everyone.

The scene here more resembles that chaotic, hodgepodge of characters around your family reunion table than the stale ritual of Christian elites—there, the whole family is gathered around, facing each other, present with one another despite any dysfunction. To emphasize this image or imaginary, we often speak of God's kin-dom, not a “kingdom” that is ruled from the top-down and thrives on hierarchies. God's kin-dom flattens any sense of greater or lesser, esteemed or underserving.

At the table of God's kin-dom, there are enough chairs for everyone. I believe, at this table, we are all bound together by our religion, everyone. That is, if we consider the real meaning of the word “religion” before it came to mean the rituals and practices of particular groups of people.

The English word *religion* is formed in history from the Latin word *religio*, which has two different understandings in its earliest expressions. Some say the word derives its origin from the Latin *relegere* (which means *to read* or *consider again*).

And I find that to be true: religion asks people to not take life at face value, to consider that there's more, to ruminate on the depth-dimension of life, its mysteries, its unseen forces like compassion and goodwill. If nothing else, we all have this religion in our shared human capacity to even consider some of life's most fundamental questions:

Why are we all here?

Why is there something instead of nothing?

What does it mean to be a human?

From where does the impulse for compassion and justice come?

To even look inward and think on what is beyond what the eye can see is the basis for *relegere*. Those who claim to be religious might join the cause of helping others in their *relegere*—not so that they come to say the same creed as you, but because a life can be transformed when an individual goes from living for self to being governed by mystery and awe and love and wonder. That is the essence of *relegere* (*to consider again*). And I believe we all have it, it just gets covered over.

Others say that *religio* is formed from a different Latin word, *religare* (which means to bind or connect). In a time that has seen a steep rise in what has become an epidemic of loneliness... in a day when it feels human to be divisive and tribal and even hateful, we are a race starving for connection. You don't have to go to church to feel the value of belonging and connection with others. The benefits of this are scientifically confirmed in our biology.

This need for human connection binds us all together at the most fundamental level. For, life itself begins not in isolation but in the womb of another. We take our first breaths in the arms of a caring community. We share a common need of *religare*. It's just that your and your neighbor's religious expression will be determined by what story you each center your lives on.

We all have *religio*, but many of our siblings throughout the world have formed their lives around really bad stories—narratives formed by fear, or the lie of lack (that there isn't enough for everyone to go around), or the lie that personal happiness is a zero-sum game, that peace must come through violence and war. Our world needs a better story.

From time to time, I mention the name of theologian Paul Tillich, who made the cover of Time magazine in 1959. Tillich really had a widespread appeal in his time, including a major influence on the religious thinking of Martin Luther

King Jr. His influence went well beyond theology and into areas such as philosophy, the arts (especially the visual arts), sociology, psychotherapy, and politics. Because of this, he was known as the “apostle to the intellectuals”. Tillich set all of humanity on an equal footing when he famously defined religion as being a matter of “ultimate concern,” arguing that everyone, not just churchgoers, has something that gives their life ultimate meaning.

Having Tillich’s definition in mind, whenever someone says, “Oh, I’m not religious”, I think to myself: Everyone’s religious—unless maybe you’re a robot—you’ve just been told a bad story about what religion is. No one is exempt from matters of ultimate concern. No one is not religious. It’s just that we cover over this commonality with other lesser stories.

Before “religion” became something we opt into—which, by the way, developed only in modern times serving the cause of Western colonization (itself, a sermon for another time)—*religio*, expressed as either *relegere* or *religare*, was our most important unifying factor as a species. We are all unified by a common religion.

The story I hold to is Christianity, in part because I’m a white man who grew up in the western hemisphere, in the US, and in a Christian household. But I choose to continue claiming to be Christian because it is the best story I know of what it means to be human. The chapters of the Jesus-story illustrate and STILL best define what radical love looks like, it best outlines the vision of flourishing justice and equality, and it offers me the best blueprint for how to live a life toward the liberation of all people.

That’s why I choose the Christian story to express my religion. If an expression of the Jesus-story isn’t serving these purposes, then it has nothing to do with Jesus, and therefore the label Christian doesn’t apply to you. And I don’t use the word *story* here to diminish what claims we make about Jesus but to amplify just how transformational Jesus is to me.

Author Brian McLaren, says: “We Christians have a story [and] we are probably at our worst when we present our faith as a system rather than a story.”

Another writer, Krista Tippett, claims: “Compassion is unleashed in wider and wider circles by signs and stories, never by statistics and strategies.”

Story is so important to forming us. You want to change a community for the better, tell them the best story. But it also goes... You want to form a nation

into a divided, hateful, tribal people, tell them a compelling yet fear-based story. It might rally the troops, but it won't lead to life.

This table is a memory tool to keep us aligned with the values of our formational story. In perhaps the most intimate setting in all the Gospels, Jesus asked his disciples at the last supper—and by extension, us—to “Do this in remembrance of me.” What he was asking is not just the opposite of forget, but also the opposite of dis-member. To ‘re-member’ is to member, connect, join, again and again and again. We partake of this meal to re-connect, re-join, re-member ourselves to the one who is all and in all, but also one to another.

I used to think remembering was merely an expression of nostalgia, to long for what once was. And certainly, recalling Jesus's life and ministry is part of our act of remembrance. But I believe Jesus is asking us here to re-join together what has been separated. To heal the divide. And this best happens around the table. Think of your most memorable times around a table with others—family, friends, or strangers. It has to be nearly impossible to hold onto petty differences when we are being fed together and sitting face-to-face with others. At the least—our best chance to heal division is at the table. How fitting to think that Jesus was a carpenter.

Remembrance isn't just trying to recall the past. Memory is an act of interpretation. When we tell our communal story, it is accumulative (like a tree whose concentric inner rings tell their story). We aren't merely reclaiming one story but weaving that ancient story into our present experience so that there is a new expression of the story that emerges for the future.

In our remembering, we re-member, join together past and present, infused with new voices, perhaps voices that were silenced in past expressions of the story. This imaginative re-membering carries forward a new expression of that old story to keep the story alive with the vibrancy of a new day.

To close, I am aware that—in this—there is a lot of story-telling, imagining, and hopefulness. For some, this belongs in the category of wishful thinking and perhaps a waste of time, given such pressing needs in our world. For the Christian, that which is not yet true in reality either becomes your delusion or your commission, to make it so.

The story we tell ourselves at this table must translate to action in the world, lest it just be another less-than-satisfying Sunday snack. That's really where

the distinction happens. We come to this table as a common people; yet we rise from this table in one of two ways: We either leave unmoved by the story OR commissioned again to live out the actions experienced here:

Blessed and broken for the world's needs—as was the bread for us—and poured out in sacrifice and service—as was the cup. The communion table is, in one way, the end of our service today but the beginning of a week of service, a life of service. May it send us yet again. Amen.