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Newark, Delaware

### “Small Wonder”

Psalm 133  
Matthew 25:31-40

World Communion is, I have always thought, one of the better ideas of the church. It was first called World-Wide Communion Sunday – and grew out of the broken human community and darkness immediately before and during World War II. What evolved in congregations was that on the first Sunday of October, Christians **all over the world** would come together to the Lord’s Table and celebrate Jesus’ love for the world—and our unity embedded in that love. A unity which transcends the barriers of nation, race, and creed.

And so it is fitting that during these recent weeks we were captivated and inspired watching Pope Francis, over and over, express grace and peace and hope.

And to such a wide variety of people. And so many of the people looked nothing like us ... their languages ... young and old and everyone in between ... the styles and colors of garb ... and most brilliantly, the shades of the people ... and they are our family. Red and yellow, black and brown and bronze and white ... ALL PRECIOUS IN GOD’S SIGHT. The whole family of God.

Syrian Christians, Syrian Muslims, Syrian Jews  
(I saw them all there together in one amazing interview) –  
At that moment ... in those precious days ...  
pilgrims, together, in our corner of the world.

So as we come to the Lord’s Table of Holy Communion this morning – Holy World Communion. In a very real way we do so with all those pilgrims who thronged Washington ... New York and Philadelphia. All of us one family in the love of God.

In her essay, “Small Wonder,” author Barbara Kingsolver tells a story set in a remote province of western Iran. The story begins with a wife and husband walking home from morning’s work in the wheat fields.

They talk and laugh as they walk, until they see approaching the slender teenage girl who was left in charge of the village babies. She is crying. She tells them that while she was tending the infants, their toddler wandered off, and she can't find him.

The mother and father frantically run home, look in all the familiar hiding places, calling his name, then the neighbor's homes, then the entire village. He's gone. A search-party of neighbors sets out into the rocky, arid outskirts; they comb the gullies and hills. Night falls. He can't possibly survive. He is so young. So vulnerable. And there are bears in the mountains.

In the morning, the men set out again at first light, up into the mountains, to search caves where the bears are, fearing the worst. Then they hear a cry. Slowly, cautiously they enter a cave, smelling the distinct aroma of a bear. Their eyes adjust to the dark and they see the bear—but not crouched to attack. It's a mother-bear, lying against the wall, curled around the child, protecting the child from these fierce intruders.

Kingsolver says the bear was lactating and her baby cub had no doubt been killed by a predator. You could say "impossible."

Or you could hear this story and think of how warm lives are drawn to one another in very cold places.

You can think of the overwhelming power of a mother's love."

You can recall that mysterious part of the DNA of each of us that sometimes is awakened to reach out to one another in compassion and kindness instead of suspicion, anger, retaliation, and violence.

I don't know whether the story is true or not. I only know that when I read it, it set me to thinking about this Sunday, World Communion Sunday,

and how basic the truth embedded in the story is to my faith,  
and how there is hope when humans act not out of an  
instinct for retaliation and revenge, but out of  
kindness.

And how, whenever and however kindness  
reveals itself, it is a “small wonder” every time.

In the meantime, we live in terrifying times,  
in a world whose wells of kindness seem everywhere to be  
running dry,  
a time when the only thing we can think to do to protect  
ourselves is build bigger and better weapons and to hit  
back harder at those who hate us and hit us.

We live in fearsome times:

Suicide bombers and precision bombs delivered by drones.  
Refugees streaming from towns and countries ravaged by  
famine and war and terrible cruelty. And too many  
passages closed by walls and fences.

Fearsome times, when:

A young woman who blows herself up, and is called a martyr,  
and more passionate young people volunteer to die for a hideous  
cause.

Fearsome times, indeed, when our schools, and yes, even churches --  
and precious youth and children are gunned-down.

Fearsome ... depressing times as schools are being closed and  
teachers laid-off, and counsellors cut ...while all the while more  
prisons are being designed and built.

Is there no alternative vision? Yes, there is.

But it doesn't offer much by way of military power or economic  
clout. It offers something far better and in the long run more  
powerful.

It offers the power of human love.

The power of God's love.

God's love for us.

God's love through us. To others.

To the world.

**A small wonder, indeed.**

This alternative vision grows out of the common roots shared by Islam,  
Judaism, and Christianity: that the one creator God has created a  
human race in God's own image and so we all are children of one God

and therefore kin to one another. It is so simple, yet so stunning. “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell in unity,” Bill Witt read those words of the psalmist.

Try to hear these forceful words of Jesus as if for the first time. They were sparked by the question,

“Master—when did we see you hungry and feed you, naked and clothed you, in prison and visited you?”

And now Jesus’ response:

“Whenever you did it to the least of these, my sisters and brothers ... my family ... you did it to me.”

It was that ... the deeply-rooted goodness of Jesus and the power of love, that the ancient world found startling... and attractive. Christians believed in a God who loves human beings, all of them—not just believers, but all. That is a new and revolutionary idea. And so are its holy consequences, namely that it is of the highest and holiest moral importance for men and women to reflect that divine love by the way we treat one another.

In the ancient world, it was stunning whenever and wherever it happened. In Rome, whenever an unwanted child was born, or when a male was desired and a baby girl appeared instead, it was common practice simply to abandon the child to die from exposure or worse.

**The early Christians astonished their neighbors by gathering up the unwanted babies.** They considered them, “Our children.”

When plague appeared, the only thing people could think of to do was to flee in the opposite direction.

**The first Christians astounded their neighbors by doing what Jesus told them to do and had demonstrated: they stayed with and ministered with the sick and dying, risking their own lives.**

Slave laborers, often prisoners of war, were kept in miserable prisons , jeered at, tormented, fed to lions ...

**The early Christians stunned their neighbors by doing what Jesus told them to do: they visited the prisoners, taking them water and food.**

Those acts of kindness were what convinced the ancient world that Christianity was true and life-changing. One of our earliest theologians, Tertullian, in the second century wrote, “What marks Christ’s followers in the eyes of our enemies is our practice of loving-kindness. ‘Look,’ they say, ‘see how they love one another.’”

And then, Tertullian, broke out of the tradition of tribes and clan and nation to a new vision of the human race. To the pagan Romans Tertullian wrote “We are your brothers and sisters, too.”

Churches, communities of faith like Head of Christiana, are in charge of keeping God’s alternate vision alive, and it happens every day in thousands of communities in ways that can only be called “small wonders,” whenever, in the name of Jesus Christ, Jesus’ followers reach out to the “least of these.”

John Dilulio, Professor of Politics, Religion, and Civil Society at the University of Pennsylvania calls congregations “paramedics of urban civil society.”

Martin O’Malley, the former Mayor of Baltimore, which had the highest addiction and murder rates in the nation, said the young people of Baltimore are being mentored by a very efficient cadre of drug dealers.

He went on, “About the only institution with an alternate vision and a credible presence in the worst neighborhoods is the church. Faithful people make a difference. Churches save and change lives in thousands of small, quiet ways that reveal an alternate vision of what the human community is called to be.”

You of Head of Christiana have been carrying and living this vision for many years ... reaching out in kindness and practical love to children and families ... to those languishing in tents and under bridges – nearby but out-of- sight ... without a home ... so you feed and help shelter and clothe and mentor. And you support all that through your remarkable Trail Race. **Small wonders!**

“We are alive in a fearsome time, and we have been given new things to fear. We’ve been delivered huge blows.

But also huge opportunities,”

There is, in fact, a better idea, an alternate vision of what we can be.

**More accurately, an alternate vision of who we are.**

And precisely in fearsome times it becomes more precious than ever.

This morning we call that vision to mind ...

This morning we practice that vision ...

**We Re-member – that is, we bring the members together. We recognize and celebrate our unity ... And that unity transcends all barriers ... all walls. It is of God. With God. With our brother Jesus Christ.**

**That's the better way.** It is a vision of the world as God intends it to be. It is a vision of men and women and children bound together by the love of the one who said, "Whatever you do it to the least of these, my family members, you do it to me."

The same one who invites us to table—all of us—to break one bread and share one cup. To eat and drink in unity.

**Small wonder. Indeed.**

Amen.