

**A CHURCH FOR ALL SPECIES; HEBREWS 2: 5-12; WORLD COMMUNION;  
10/4/15; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

It's World Communion – when Christians of all kinds around the earth celebrate the central sacrament of our faith – a sacrament about which even while we celebrate it we still find ourselves in conflict over a five hundred year old argument.

There is a certain irony of the church celebrating its central liturgical rite together but in disagreement. This Sunday in common for communion started in 1933 at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh and grew out of an ecumenical movement that sought to promote Christian unity.

But now, almost a century after that first World Communion Sunday we might wonder if there will ever come a day when Christians will be one in Christ – rather than fragmented by internal and external, deal-breaking disputes. Like the church's ongoing battle with the culture. Richard Stearns, president of World Vision, an evangelical mission agency, says, "I have been deeply grieved by the damage done to the reputation of Christianity in recent years by Christians shaking their fists at the culture. Perhaps the shortest definition of God in the bible," he says, "is 1 John 4:8, that proclaims, 'God is love.' We should focus on showing the world the simplicity of that revolutionary idea."

What would it take to quell religious strife within the church and between those in church who harangue the culture with fundamentalist fist-shaking? How to get warring parties to lay down their arms and reaffirm that we are called above all else, by both Testaments and Jesus himself to "love God with our whole mind, heart, soul and strength and our neighbor as ourselves."

Perhaps the biggest message of the pope's recent visit is that we don't need to wait for a meeting of the cardinals or an international congress of religions to approve any edict or statement; rather we can and should proceed, right now, right where we are to demonstrate the gospel's radical call to love.

Which is what Jesus did. At a time when the religious authorities of his day made a mockery of biblical justice and ethics, Jesus went about his ministry fulfilling the spirit of the law. "I come not to change but to fulfill the law and prophets," he said.

Perhaps churches and church leaders doing what they felt the bible and their conscience called them to do would be a recipe for ecclesiastical anarchy; but could that be any worse than the present state of affairs?

Diverse coalitions might gather around visionary leaders and ideas like Pope Francis and climate change or Bishop Tutu and restorative justice or Bruce MacClaren's finding common ground in mission beyond the culture wars.

The pope's call for such a church has appeal beyond Roman Catholicism. "I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty," he said, "because it has been out on the streets rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined." World Communion, could be a call not just for one church but one human family, sustaining one world.

What would such a church look like, what would its priorities be? Some church leaders, Francis among them, are connecting compassion with climate change; calling the nations to take impending environmental disaster seriously.

Here's a simple analogy. We have some leaky roofs here at Westminster. You'll be hearing more about them as the Session is in the early stages of organizing a capital and mission campaign.

But because the roof is leaking, everything else inside is at risk: our landmark Aeolian Skinner Organs, our Steinway pianos, our beautifully restored sanctuary, our refinished wooden floors, our pews, our business office and technology. There has already been some damage. Yes, there are other capital issues that need to be fixed, but the roof is the top priority. The good news is that we have received a grant to jump-start roof repair that cost well into the six figures.

Like Westminster's roof, there are holes in the roof of the world, the ozone layer – that protects earth from the relentless heat and infra-red rays of the sun. The holes are caused by carbon-generated gases – from combustion engines in cars, coal-burning power plants, and a long list of items we still use and are not willing to give up.

As the earth heats – even with the reduction in emissions called for at the UN summit in Paris in November – the increase in warming will still be six degrees by 2030. That doesn't sound like much but six degrees globally will result in more melting of the polar ice caps resulting in higher levels for the oceans resulting in the disappearance of low lying lands – like New York City, New Orleans, San Francisco, Miami or take your pick of coastal cities.

The developed nations will figure out drastic and monumentally expensive ways to retrench but for underdeveloped nations people will be displaced and unable to find work and food and shelter shortages will plague the human family. Not to mention the decimation of thousands of plant and animal species, starting with the polar bears who will be unable to sustain themselves without their glacial habitat.

There was a glimpse of what, at first, seemed like an increment of good news from India last week when India's leaders announced they would strive for the emission standards called for at the summit in December. However, they said, we cannot provide a date when we will meet those standards.

Why? Because India is still developing its economy through a vast infrastructure of coal-fired industries. When pressed on the date they responded with a good question: Why should India or any nation like it be asked to foot the bill the developed nations ran up by growing their economies and industries with cheap coal?

I can imagine that it would take something similar to the arms agreements we made with Saudi Arabia and Israel to get the Iran nuclear deal to work. We are providing vast armaments to those nations who feel at risk with Iran. If you want us to reduce our emissions, India might say, then pay for the difference it will cost us from using coal to converting to safer fuels and technologies.

Try to get that proposal through a Congress in which some representatives still doubt that climate change is real! What kind of corporate leader or stockholders would it take to redistribute wealth by restructuring earnings and profits to convert developing nations to climate-safe technology? It would require an all encompassing multi-national, public/private partnership similar to the one formed during WWII.

Just as we have other things to fix in this building – heating and plumbing, stained glass windows, oak doors, flooring – there are serious matters in our nation and world that cry out for attention: race relations, rights for women, gays and lesbians, income inequality, educational opportunity, health care for the poorest, gun control – all of which are of major importance and needed to get our house and world in order.

But if we don't fix the roof of this church it won't matter what we do with the windows or wiring systems; just as if we don't fix the atmosphere, human and economic justice will be moot.

I am not proposing that we focus on climate change to the exclusion of all the other matters that the church is called to address. But I am suggesting that climate change needs to be close to if not at the very top of our personal and church agenda.

It would mean educating ourselves, changing daily living habits, fighting a fight that isn't as visible as the scourge of poverty or lack of gun control.

On this World Communion Sunday we need to re-arrange our theological and social justice priorities. Rather than allow Calvin's or Rome's definitions of communion to continue to divide us, perhaps we all need to recommit to the greatest commandment – to love God and neighbor. In fact, that ancient, simple admonition seems more important to a world threatened with climate change than all the wars that took place over the meaning of communion that still divide us.

If love of God and neighbor eclipsed our liberal and conservative agendas and our theological disputes, we might find our hearts and minds opened to new possibilities for a safer, sustainable world.

They say the rats are poised to inherit the earth; that after we destroy human civilization including much of plant and animal life by burning up the planet, those repugnant rodents will take over. Apparently, rats are able to adapt and reproduce so rapidly that a transformed landscape and vastly reduced food sources will pose little obstacle to them.

But then while rats are smart and adaptive (and remember they are, nevertheless, God's creatures just trying to survive) humans are endowed with God given-gifts like ingenuity and cooperation – *“You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the sea.”* Isn't it time we start living like God's people? May this simple meal today, rather than a worn-out argument that divides us, be a rallying cry to become the caretakers of the earth God has already equipped us to be. Amen.