

### AT ONE TABLE

--Have you heard the one about the old UCC fellow who dies and goes to heaven?

The good man is met at the pearly gates by St. Peter himself, who kindly offers to take the newcomer on a tour of the place. Heaven, it turns out, is everything that he has ever imagined, and even more.

At one point in the tour, St. Peter puts his finger up to his lips, indicating that the new arrival should be very quiet, as the two of them tiptoe past a door leading into a large room off to one side. As they slip by, he peers into the room, seeing that it is actually filled with a sizeable group of people, milling around and enjoying their heavenly state.

Needless to say, the UCC guy is exploding with curiosity regarding what that was all about. Once out of earshot, therefore, he immediately asks St. Peter about those people.

“Oh,” replies St. Peter, “those are the Presbyterians. They think they’re the only ones up here.”

--This little story has been circulating for a long while, with the punch line changing each time, depending upon at whom the storyteller wishes to poke some humorous criticism. I’ll pick on the Presbyterians this morning. (My apologies to any Presbyterians who might be among us.) I could just as easily have insulted the Baptists, the Lutherans, or any other Christian group with which we may be familiar.

No matter who might be the butt of the joke, which we can’t help laughing at, it is the same serious point being made. It is a point about the sadly fractured state of Christianity, to say nothing about a sort of suspect superiority-complex that figures our kind of believer qualifies for Paradise, while everyone else is consigned to . . . well, someplace much hotter.

Scripture may call the Church “the Body of Christ,” suggesting an assortment of limbs and organs working together in some integrated and coordinated fashion. But, in reality, the history of the Church has been one of an ongoing estrangement of limb from limb, and antagonism between organ and organ. Throughout the centuries, Christians have quibbled over every conceivable piddly matter of procedure or obscure theological point, exploiting the opportunity at hand not only for disagreement and disharmony but also for division, alienation, and schism.

No real body could ever survive that sort of dismembering or splitting.

Whatever the actual number of distinct Christian groups these days--certainly in the hundreds, probably in the thousands--it is powerful testimony to the disunity that exists within our faith, each body giving the impression that it is the only one who has it right and therefore the only one that can make it in through those pearly gates.

--It is this self-righteous and even arrogant attitude which makes the occasion of a “World

Communion Sunday” such an important one, at least for the Christian part of the globe’s population. I guess that’s a start--even though it falls far short of addressing our conviction that, when we arrive in heaven, we expect certainly not to encounter any Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists there. Why, perish the thought that it could be us in that side room thinking that we are alone there! But we’ll leave that sermon for another time.

For the moment, we honor this annual occasion where, despite all that distinguishes us and separates us from one another as Christians, we demonstrate concretely that we really are part of a singular system of belief and practice. There is no way to participate in the eating and drinking that momentarily we shall share in without proclaiming in unison just that point.

And that makes Jesus’ prayer for the Church, as found in this morning’s reading in John 17, all the more poignant. “Holy Father,” he prays, “protect [those in the church] in Your name, . . . so that they may be one, as we are one” (John 17.11b).

Imagine. That they may be one--not coincidentally, the words on the logo of the UCC. Though we have always regarded ourselves as being a “united and uniting” Church, given our internal divisions, even we have a long way to go ever to achieve anything close to oneness.

--Let us be aware, then, that, despite its notable shortcomings, this day is truly remarkable. Our differing theologies and politics to the side, by virtue of what we do here, like it or not, we are one--even including those pesky Presbyterians, Baptists, Lutherans, and all the rest of them. In our gathering from all corners and persuasions at the same Table--in some gesture of sort of “faking it till we make it,” as the saying goes--we, at least for these few moments, give the impression that we could be one.

World Communion Sunday may be the single Sunday of the year where we Christians are afforded an experience of going through the motions of something which, in God’s eyes, is nevertheless real concerning the Body of believers that Jesus leaves in his wake.

The questions, however, loom large: If this day we have an appreciation of our unity, going forward what exactly shall we do with it?

For the sake of the “impartial” God, how shall we translate this experience into new and different behavior?

It seems to me that, in our world of too little understanding and too much intolerance, there is a crying out for just such new and different behaviors.

Fellow Christians, what do you think?

What do you think?