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Pilgrim Congregational Church
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World Communion Sunday
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A MEDITATION FOR WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY

Ephesians 4:1-6

It can be hard to feel the reality of the church beyond our own congregation, especially in any global sense of the church. On this World Communion Sunday, I'm going to try by sharing an experience I had exactly ten years ago today, one of the memorable events of my ministry.

I was in Istanbul, on sabbatical from my church in St. Paul, spending two months in Turkey, where I had been a teacher twenty-five years before. Though Turkey is 97% Muslim, Istanbul contains an amazingly diverse minority Christian population. It remains the home of the chief Patriarch of all Orthodox churches, the seat of the patriarch of most Armenians, and the center of many other groups. In this setting, the head of our historic U.C.C. mission there over the years has been the organizer and coordinator of much of the ecumenical activity that has gone on in Istanbul, where he's been known, half-humorously, as the "Protestant pope." As the then chair of our Board for World Ministries' Middle East Committee, in a very loose sense I was the "Protestant pope's" boss! It was in this context that I had the honor of being invited to give the sermon at the ecumenical World Communion Sunday service, one of the major events of the diverse Christian community of Istanbul.

We have World Communion Sunday and we try to imagine being part of a varied global family, helped by the variety of breads on the table and music on our lips. In Istanbul, worshipping together were Christians of at least ten distinct traditions and the Scripture reading Steve just read was read in six different languages. It was at once an awesome and deeply moving experience for me. This morning I want to share that experience by sharing parts of that sermon which I came upon last week. One thing I *won't* do today is pause every two or three sentences for the Turkish translation! My hope is that you will hear these words, not as a relic out of Kemp's past, but as visiting as real a World Communion experience as there can be, and maybe in the process picking up an enduring thought or two! Hear them in the context of the setting I've described of the variety of people in that Istanbul church - and in the context of *our* lives and times:

Greetings and peace in the name of Jesus Christ and in the name of the God of all people, who is Lord of all, and works through all, and is in all. I feel it a deep privilege to be a part of this worship service with you. As a young teacher of English, I lived in Turkey for three years over twenty-five years ago....Over the past month, traveling in different parts of Turkey, I've had deep feelings of homecoming. I'm glad to be here.

I bring you greetings on this World Communion Sunday from my own church tradition, the United Church of Christ in the United States. We treasure relations with fellow Christians in every part of the world, but especially our long friendships here in Turkey.

On a more personal level, in about a half hour members of my own home church in... Minnesota will be gathering to worship and celebrate World Communion Sunday. I have written them that I will be with you today, and they will remember us in their prayers six thousand miles away. Isn't that what World Communion Sunday is about - Christians joining together in spirit the world over! I know that *many* of us have family and friends in many different places who may be worshiping on this special day, and we remember them, wherever they are.

In a very special way our gathering here in Istanbul itself tells us what World Communion Sunday is about. Here *we* are, representing very different national, cultural, and church traditions; yet, despite our variety, our diversity, even our divisions, this day we find ourselves joined together in the unity of our one Lord, Jesus Christ. *That* is the rich blessing of this day for us....But we are also painfully aware that not all Christians *can* express their unity at the Lord's Table. So on World Communion Sunday we acknowledge both the joy *and* the incompleteness of our celebration and our life together as Christ's people.

We need a day like this. we need to know that we *are* one body in Christ, that we're not making our Christian witness alone, that we're not on life's journey alone. Can you remember a time when *you* journeyed alone, when you really felt completely alone? I think back to the loneliness of my first trip across Turkey -twenty eight [now 38!] years ago. I was young, just out of school myself and had never taught a class in my life. Just a few months before, the *last* thing I imagined myself doing was teaching school!

That thought was frightening enough. It was also my first trip away from my country, first time being alone far from home. We six new teachers had our four day introduction to Turkey here in Istanbul, no language study, then were sent off to our various schools. I was taken to Hydarpasha Station and put on the train - the Toros Expres - and my *real* introduction to Turkey began. For twenty-five hours, stopping, it seemed, at every town and village, the "Expres" slowly wound its way southward across the country, carrying a full load of passengers, including exactly *one* non-Turk, who had been in the country four days and had a Turkish vocabulary of roughly ten words. Of course, I was the object of great amusement and curiosity in those days - and at one level, at first I enjoyed all the attention and the adventure of travel in a new land. But at a deeper level, I remember it being a lonely experience, traveling in unknown places, going toward an unknown destination. *Very* unknown, and a little frightening.

Eventually we reached the station closest to Tarsus where I was to be met, the tiny village of Yenice. I got off the train filled with relief, hope, and expectation - but, alas, no one was

there to meet me! The train pulled away, the curious villagers stared at me briefly and went *their* ways, and I sat on my bags and waited and waited - alone. All kinds of horrible thoughts came to my mind: Had I traveled on the wrong day? Had I got off at the wrong station? Had I come to the wrong country? Well, about an endless hour later the school minibus finally drove up, and smiles and welcomes assured me that all was well. I had been found. I was not destined to live out my days alone on the station platform in Yenice. I was welcomed into...a family of people bound together in our life in the Tarsus school.

Isn't that the meaning of World Communion Sunday for us? It reminds us all that, whoever we are, wherever we journey in life, whatever times of aloneness we may have to endure, even those seemingly endless waits in our own Yenices, in the end we belong to one another - because we belong to the God of us all. We can say this about ourselves as individuals, and we can say it about our different churches. That's why today we celebrate the blessing of being many people gathered about one Table, confessing our oneness before God....

There is too much pain and strife, too much hunger and suffering in our world. We feel it deeply ourselves. Our God of love does call us to carry the healing gospel of love to one another, to our world....In his clear, powerful way, [the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians] tells how we Christians, through all our diversity, may do this, and why we need do it *together*.

"I urge you [he wrote the Christians of Ephesus] ...to live a life that measures up to the standards *God* set when God called you. Be always humble, gentle, and patient. Show your love by being tolerant with one another. Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together. There is one Body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope to which God has called you. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; there is one God and Father of all humanity, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all." (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Friends, brothers and sisters in Christ: may this Lord of us all bring *us* together. May the Spirit of this God work through *us* that the world may know the vision of Christ's peace and love. And in the midst of our own fears and troubles,...be assured that we travel in life...with one another and, above all, with the God who offers each and all of us strength and peace sufficient for the day. Thanks be to God, the "one God and Father of all humanity, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all," yes, even each of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Pilgrim friends: on this World Communion Sunday 1995, may we reach out in our hearts to friends and family, to Christians of all varieties in every place the world over. Know, too, that their prayers reach across the miles to us. On this one day at least, in the words of the old hymn, we act as "one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth." Let's even try for a few days more! Amen.

more! Amen.