

**Filled With Joy
2 Timothy 1: 1-14
Jon Frost**

I love World Communion Sunday. I didn't always feel this way. For years, in my mind, it was merely that one Sunday a year where we would awkwardly labor through an attempt to sing a song from another culture, or on our most daring Sundays, a song in another language. However, I have come to take immense comfort in the truth of which World Communion Sunday reminds us. The work of the gospel of Jesus Christ is not ours alone. It is not dependent upon North American Christianity. Friends, we are just one part of the world-wide global Church which spans every nation, every language, and every culture where Jesus is proclaimed as Lord. The Lord's Table around which we gather today, extends far beyond these walls to the north, south, east, and west as God's people around the world gather this day at God's gracious invitation.

Paul writes in verse 9, "This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began." Think about that for a moment. Christ was present and active before the ages began. Before there were nations. Before there were borders. Before there were divisions.

I didn't realize this until this week but the celebration of World Communion Sunday actually began in the Presbyterian Church. Go team! It was first celebrated at the Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh in 1933 and later became a denominational practice in 1936. It reminds us of our oneness in Christ with brothers and sisters around the world. But beyond that, it reminds us that we need one another.

D.T. Niles, a former executive secretary of evangelism for the World Council of Churches once said, "The gospel is never safe in any culture unless there is a witness from beyond that culture." This shouldn't surprise us, because if God's grace was working in Christ before the ages began, but then that grace was revealed in a particular time and place in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and then that news began to spread worldwide, there is no way that one culture's way of telling the story is complete on its own. We each have our unique language, metaphors and cultural contexts. Here's one example of this from our hymnal that we use in morning services.

Hymn #524 is called the Rice of Life. Maybe sounds a bit odd? There's a note at the bottom of the page that says the following: "For the rice-based peoples of Asia, Jesus' self-disclosure as the Bread of Life in John 6 does not relate to daily experience as it does in Western societies. This hymn seeks to bridge that gap and to alert us to such assumptions." Years ago theologian Darrell Guder said in a workshop in our presbytery that the gospel possesses infinite translatability and that no culture can claim to be normative. That's what it means when in the Apostles' Creed we say we believe in a

catholic, or universal church. No culture can capture the gospel perfectly for all people and places.

In Christ, before the ages, God was preparing to pour out God's grace upon all people. Yet, within this incredibly diverse and worldwide family, the gospel takes root in people's lives at a very specific contextual and relational level. When we read these pages, we are reading accounts of actual relationships, and in this particular letter a very intimate one. I'm struck by verse 4 when Paul writes, "Recalling your tears, I long to see you so that I may be filled with joy." Timothy is a young leader whom Paul has mentored and the last time they departed one another's company was quite painful to the point of tears. But Paul isn't the only one to have invested in Timothy's life. The faith that Timothy has first lived in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice, and now lives in him. That is how the gospel takes root in people's lives all over the world - through their relationships, often with the people in closest proximity to them.

On this World Communion Sunday, may we be encouraged; may be emboldened in our faith; may we be unashamed to claim our identity in Christ; and may our eyes be open to the amazing truth that God was at work in Christ before the ages began, and that that is true for all places. That means God is already present and active in cultures outside of our own. This is an amazing invitation to mutually learn from one another, to be ushered into a deeper unity precisely because of our diversity.

May we come to know this unity, not in principle or theory only, but in actual relationships across cultures and languages, where in sharing the fullness of our lives, we would be filled with joy; joy that comes from the Lord in whom we find our unity.

Amen.