

“Getting To Know Our Neighbors”
Matthew 10:13-16

Pastor Liz Miller
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There are many things that make Edgewood a unique congregation, unlike any I’ve ever encountered in my very churchy life, but one of my favorite things is that Edgewood has an unusually high percentage of people who have lived in countries other than the United States. From Nicaragua to South India, Indonesia to Cuba, Kenya to Canada and beyond, we are a people who see ourselves as global citizens, invested in politics, cultures, and languages that extend beyond the borders of both Michigan and the United States.

Which is not to say that all of us have those personal kinds of connections or experiences. The closest I’ve come to living abroad is when I moved from California to Georgia. But by belonging to Edgewood and getting to know many of you, I have heard stories that I wouldn’t have known otherwise, I have been asked to pray for people in places I have never been, I have been reoriented to consider my perspective and reality as rather small, significant perhaps to me, but small in light of all the different perspectives and realities that exist in our world.

I am never more appreciative of this part of Edgewood than I am on World Communion Sunday. This is a day that is made for our church. Typically when we approach the sacrament of communion, we remember that each of us here, no matter who we are, or where we are on life’s journey, whether we believe a lot or a little, no matter what our age or gender or sexuality or religious background is, we remember that every single person is welcome at God’s table. And we eat together, just a nibble but a nibble laden with deep symbolism beyond the piece of bread or cracker that we consume.

On World Communion Sunday we still do that, but we also turn outward, remembering that the boundaries of God's table do not end at the exit doors to the church. We remember and honor that we share this meal with siblings in Christ all over the world, from Lansing to Lebanon, from Holt to Hong Kong, from Okemos to Oman, which is the only country in the world that starts with O. Oman is a small country southeast of Saudi Arabia and is ranked #73 as the most peaceful country in the world according to the Global Peace Index. The United States is #122.

We mark World Communion Sunday in different ways each year - sometimes drawing in different languages in our prayers and music, sometimes weaving in music from around the world, sometimes praying our way around the globe. Today I chose prayers for our liturgy from pastors and priests that reminded me that the wisdom of my colleagues extends far beyond our United Church of Christ denomination. This year I would especially like us to remember that being in communion with others is about more than paying lip service to the relationship once a year. It is about knowing each other, the big events that shape us as churches, communities, and countries, and the small things that are only revealed through mutual relationship - through taking the time to get to know each other.

When I talk with Edgewood folks who have lived in other countries, you never tell me statistics or historical facts about these places. You start with stories. You tell me about something funny that happened at a dinner party or going to a worship service that was unlike anything you had experienced before, you tell me about places you worked, food you ate, friendships that were formed, and all the little things that make a big impact on our lives. Some of the stories are about being a transplant to new places, and some are laced with deep longing for the country you were raised or where your extended family still lives. They are rather

ordinary stories, not unlike other stories you might read of disciples gathering for a meal, of friends bringing someone to a healer, of a conversation at a water well.

On this World Communion Sunday I want us to remember that storytelling is a part of our faith because that is how we get to know other people and in hearing and reflecting on stories, how we get to know something about ourselves. I have been looking up stories that come from churches around the world that are the kind of ordinary stories of churches being churches, the kind you have to go looking for or know someone involved to discover because they don't make it to the New York Times or the BBC. I want to share with you three of the stories I found.

The first comes from the Church of England, which is a denomination that struggles as much as we do, if not more, with trying to figure out what it means to be a modern church with old traditions, how to connect with new folks and young folks, and how to find each other in the midst of a global pandemic. The Church of England has "pop up" churches which are small gatherings of people in communities that might only exist for a short time, or might eventually grow into something permanent. They don't meet in church sanctuaries, but rather meet out in the community.

One of these pop up churches is in Lancaster and had been meeting in the local library before lockdown. Once restrictions lifted, the church found a new home - amongst the vegetables and flowers of a community garden. They have found new growth in their location - pun intended - and now have about 50 people meeting outside together each week, finding that people are drawn by the simplicity of discussing the big questions in life and praying for people together. Their bishop, Dr. Jill Duff, says, "It's the only church I know where people give their apologies if they can't come. It's as if they don't want to miss out on the heavenly banquet."

Our second story comes further south from the All Africa Conference of Churches. The consortium of churches across the continent is working together to develop an advocacy toolkit called Justice for Widows. Recognizing that many widowed women are subjected to dehumanizing practices due to cultural norms and beliefs that rob them of their rights and dignity, the toolkit is a resource for local communities and congregations to build a structured approach for sustained advocacy on the rights of widows. This is an ecumenical project, that is many kinds of churches working together, recognizing that the call to care for the widowed is a faith issue they can unite on despite other differences.

Our final story is from Colombia, from the city of Planadas. There the Catholic Church is investing in a local coffee growers collective in an effort to aid peace in the region, recognizing that economic stability is a key ingredient to peace. This is a region that has previously been impacted by violent conflict, with children being recruited by militias, and there is a fear that they will return to those days. Even in the absence of violence, there is still much peace work to do.

The coffee growers collective is training dozens of young people in every stage of the coffee process from agriculture and identifying bird biodiversity on their farms to coffee tasting and barista skills. More than half of the 26,000 residents of Planadas are under 30 years old, so this ministry works to build pride and job growth in their own community. Many rural coffee communities experience a flight of young people to bigger cities and universities, but under this collective, in Planadas the opposite is happening. Father Camilo Bernal says, “The idea is to put the education close to where the young people are so that they can help to open up the potential of the region, so that they fall in love with their own region.”

A new church plant taking root among plants in England. Churches working together across Africa to advocate systemic care for an oppressed group. A church investing in the young people in its community as a part of their commitment to peace. These are the people and the churches that are with us when we come to the table together, not just today, but every time we celebrate communion. These are our siblings in Christ. This is the fullness of the body of Christ. Because we are connected we know that these ministries were born of committee meetings, compromises, big dreams and saying, “I wonder if...” to each other, lots of volunteers, and deep commitment to their shared purpose despite the busyness of life and all the reasons they could create to say it’s too much or it’s never going to work.

In learning these stories I learned something about our global siblings across Christ’s church, but I was also reminded of how similar our own church is - finding new ways to gather, partnering with our neighbors, and working for peace in our community. The details differ, but it’s all church. On this World Communion Sunday I thank God for church, and the people that make it up, here and around the world. Thank you for your commitments, your dreams, your pursuit of peace, knowing that even as we do so here, we are one of many doing so around the world. Amen.