Sunday, October 6, 1985
UNITY IN SPITE OF US
Mark 9:38-41

We human beings set up so many artificial barriers in this world. We have lots of ways of dividing people into separate groups — ways of saying, “That person is not like the rest of us, and since we perceive him to be different, he must be kept apart.” Why do differences bother us so much?

He’s Black. She’s white. She’s tall. He’s short. He’s Polish. She’s Irish. What difference does it make? The barriers of race are familiar to all of us — segregated education, segregated housing, and not too many years ago in this country, even segregated drinking fountains, swimming pools, and lunch counters. Artificial barriers set up by well-meaning people; but the problems they cause are never-ending. Today, we are seeing again the problems that years of segregation are causing in South Africa. The longer people are kept artificially apart, the more difficult it is to get people back together.

We separate people in so many ways. Labeling people is a form of this separation. He’s a reactionary! She’s a conservative! He’s a radical! She’s a communist! With one little word, we squeeze the humanity out of a person and turn off our own humanity at the same time. We tend to see people in terms of adjectives, instead of nouns.

There is one characteristic all true saints have in common. It is not piety or love of God, as commonly understood. Many people are pious who are far from saintly. The quality all saints have in common is identification. Through some mysterious process, only dimly perceived by the rest of us, they are able to identify with the full range of creation. They are able to see the unity, the harmony which connects all of us, and they concentrate on that. Others of us are only able to see the differences which we then use to separate us.

It’s not a new problem. In the story read earlier from the Gospel of Mark, the disciples of Jesus complained to him one day that they saw an individual casting out demons in the name of Jesus. But since this man was not part of their group — he was different from them — they told him to quit doing what he was doing. He was not one of them. He didn’t have their seal of approval.

However, Jesus told them, “Do not forbid him... for he that is not against us, is for us.” In other words, true religious faith and practice should bring us together, not separate us.

Frankly, what worries me about a lot of today’s culture is our tendency to want to separate people. There is a new streak of selfishness that permeates much of American culture in our time.

Some of today’s movies show this. The movie “Trading Places,” for example, celebrates success at the expense of others. The movie “Cocoon,” which has been very popular and is quite entertaining, advocates eternal happiness for the elderly in an ending that thumbs its nose at the younger generation, which is left behind. The implied value system echoes the old cynical observation after a shipwreck: “Pull up the ladder, Mac, I’m aboard.”

What is missing for many people is this sense of connectedness or what can be called “religious sensibility.” That term is not meant to suggest simple piety or churchgoing, though

both could be included in such a description. Religious sensibility suggests a willingness to take seriously one's place in the world as a member of a loving community linked tightly with all other living creatures and living things. It is based on the assumption of one God who brings all things together and desires that we live in unity and harmony.

There was one movie I saw this past summer which showed both our tendency to separate and segregate with prejudice, but the movie's ending showed that we are all united and connected with one another in spite of us. The movie was "Places in the Heart." The story takes place in central Texas in the 1930s. In that small Texas town, we see both prejudice at work and a lack of prejudice.

A Black hired hand comes to live with a widow and her children, and they struggle together to make a living. However, there are people in that community who do not like the idea of that arrangement and do their best to drive away the Black man. He finally leaves. However, at the same time, we see in the story the suggestion that these small-town religious people were struggling toward one another within a context of a belief in God.

The closing scene of the movie is a simple communion service on a Sunday morning in that town. In that communion service, characters in the story who had never related to one another or could not do so, now if they were present or alive, the same people are seen as being present in the communion service in spirit. Thus the movie suggests that God connects all of us to one another in spite of our tendency to want to separate each other.

That is the true meaning of Holy Communion, and it is a meaning underscored on this World-Wide Communion Sunday. Today, Christians all over the world are gathered around Christ's table using a variety of liturgies and practices — indicating that even though at one level we are divided, on God's level we are united. We are one in spite of us. Our unity is not something produced by us but given to us in Christ.

However, the practical, everyday problem of expressing this unity and living as if connected remains.

And the scandal is that it remains in the church as well as in the world outside the church. We Christians still want to fence off the table of Christ. We are like those disciples in the story from Mark's Gospel — we want to forbid people because they are not of our group.

As someone has written, "Our separate communion tables may turn out to be the starkest theological inconsistency and spiritual disobedience. Such inconsistency amounts to saying, 'We are one in Christ our Savior,' nevertheless we shall stay at separate tables, because we have been divided all these years."

Today, at this communion table, Christ is our host and we are united through him to every human being everywhere. As the hymn puts it, "In Christ there is no east or west, nor yet a south or north: but one great family of love throughout the whole wide earth." Amen.