

Turn the World Around World Communion 2023

I love this time of year.

It's not because pumpkin lattes are back on the menu at Starbucks, it's not because the leaves are about to start their turning, and it's not because it's "*sweata weatha*", to quote the SNL skit.

I love this time of year because it's wedding season.

Fall is now the most popular time to be married, which is why pretty much every one of my Saturdays from now until December is spoken for – and I love it. I love doing weddings.

As I found out last year, when I was the mother of the bride for one of those Fall weddings,

officiating is a heck of a lot easier than actually organizing the whole thing.

As the pastor, I get all the fun stuff:

I get to enter into a couple's life when they are brimming with excitement, and full of love and giggles and nervous and joy.

Last Sunday afternoon, I officiated the first of this Fall's weddings, and it was indeed full of love, laughter and joy.

It was also one of the most extraordinary weddings I've been a part of.

Let me tell you why.

And to tell you why, I need to take you back to the year 1999.

That year, this congregation made a decision together – we made a commitment to sponsor a refugee family.

We committed to providing at least six months of housing, plus all the mentoring and guidance and emotional support that a family arriving in a strange new world would need.

We were excited! and a little nervous, too.

Then we got the word:

we would be welcoming a mother and her children who had fled the terrible civil war in Sierra Leone.

Their story was extraordinary – they had barely escaped with their lives, getting out just in time on an overcrowded boat that made its way up the west coast of Africa to Gambia.

They'd been refugees for a long time, waiting to be cleared, waiting for a new home. And their new home would now be with us.

I was there in the apartment in Bridgeport when they arrived.

And that's when I first met the Hanciles family:

Ursula and her children Claire and Cleophas.

Ursula was extraordinary – she'd been the highest-ranking woman in her country's military; she was a strong and tenacious mother, and a woman of deep faith.

In the years to come, Ursula would become a member of this church's Mission Board, and one of our Deacons.

Claire and Cleophas would be confirmed here, become Junior Deacons, travel with me on the Appalachia Service trip.

A little over three years ago, Cleophas fell in love with a sweet young woman named Jessica, who'd moved from the West Coast to the East.

Together, Cleo and Jessica and Claire cared for Ursula in her last days, as cancer took her from us a year ago.

And last Sunday was Cleo and Jessica's wedding day.

It was pouring rain – because that's what it does on weekends now – so what was going to be an outdoor wedding in Rye, New York, quickly became an indoor wedding.

So there I am, standing at the front of a room into which 150 chairs have been hurriedly placed,
in front of an arch of flowers quickly brought in from outside.
And it is grey and rainy but this room is filled with light and color.
Cleo's relatives are there, many of them clad in the traditional clothing of a West African wedding,
all of them in exuberant colors, all of them joyful.
Jess' relatives have gathered from Spokane and California and the Midwest,
and they too are bubbling over with joy.
And as the music begins, Cleophas steps into the room,
and beside him is his sister Claire.
And many of us, me included, begin to weep –
because as we see them, we see, we *feel*, the presence of their mother,
and we know Ursula is with us, too.
As Cleo and Claire walk up the aisle, the crowd spontaneously erupts into cheers.
The groomsmen walk in – well, strut in, really –
and the bridesmaids dance their way up the aisle.
And in comes Jessica and her father,
and we all cry again.

In my message, I talk about Cleo's journey from Sierra Leone to this moment,
and I talk about this Church, and the joy that we had in being part of that journey.
And I talk about the hope-filled journey that lies ahead for him and his Jess.

When the ceremony is over, and I declare them married,
I am surprised when I hear another voice speaking right after mine –
From the second row,
one of Cleophas' relatives, a distinguished gentleman with a cane,

is calling out words of blessing in a language I do not know –
 Others around him join in,
 and we bless and cheer Cleo and Jess down the aisle in every language we
 know.

And as I stood there and looked around the room,
 a room filled with every color and every joy,
 a room filled with memory and hope,
 I thought to myself: “here it is: the Kingdom of God.
 Here it is.”

People were always asking Jesus what this *kingdom of God* concept was.
 What was it going to look like,
 how would we know when it was here?

And Jesus would say some mysterious things, like “the kingdom of God is
 within you.”
 and “the Kingdom is all around you.”
 But one thing he said a **lot** was that the kingdom of God was like an amazing
 party,
 like a wedding feast, he said, a feast to which all God’s people were invited.
 A banquet where there would be a place for everyone.

Denise just read that to you, that quote from Luke’s Gospel.
 Jesus said, “*people will come from east and west and north and south and
 they will eat at the table in the kingdom of God.*”
 In the Kingdom of God, all are welcome, he was saying.
 At Christ’s great dinner table, there’s a place for everyone.

Jesus lived that welcome every moment of his life.
 Jesus began his life on this earth excluded, born in a stable --

and he spent the whole rest of his life making sure exclusion wouldn't happen to anyone else.

He lived *inclusion*.

In fact, his disciples were always fielding complaints about it.

“What is it with your boss?” said the religious leaders,

“every time we turn around, there he is again, eating dinner with tax collectors and lepers and women of ill repute.”

Jesus was constantly in trouble for who he broke bread with.

He didn't care.

And what that means for us is that no matter who we are or who we've been,

who we're trying to be or where we're headed,

there is a place at the table for us.

We're invited to the party.

Jesus sends an invitation to each and everyone of us.

He invites each of us into his kingdom,

which is to say he invites each of us into his love.

Lost, found, forgiven, forgiving,

hungering, hurting, giving, hoping,

each one of us, each one of us is invited and welcomed into his joy.

This is a particularly good day for us to remember that.

This is Worldwide Communion Sunday,

a day when Christ-followers *everywhere* gather around the table,

with their hearts and prayers open to their sisters and brothers in every country.

Today Jesus' table extends right round the world.

Today at this table we gather everyone in

from south and north, from east and west:

we here on Greenfield Hill eat at the same table with a family in Syria, a woman in India, secret churches in China, worshipers in Sierra Leone, Bolivia, Vietnam.

All are here with us,

all invited into our presence, into our hearts.

Every language imaginable, every color in God's' rainbow,
all [*have gathered*] at this table.

Today we remember this truth:

that as Christ followers, we are two things at once:

we are the *welcomed* ones,

and we are the *welcoming* ones.

We are invited into joy,

and we are the ones who offer joy.

We are embraced with love –and we open our arms with love.

That's why I love the song that Michael Crowley and our Chancel Choir chose for this Worldwide Communion Sunday.

That wonderful Harry Belafonte song that they sang with such joy.

Listen to some of the words again:

We are of the spirit / Truly of the spirit

Only can the spirit / Turn the world around!

Do you know who I am? / Do I know who you are?

See we one another clearly.

Turn the world around.

The most beautiful explanation that Harry Belafonte gave about how he came to write this song

was the explanation he gave to Fozzie Bear –

that's right, Fozzie Bear the Muppet.

Waaaay back in the '90s, Harry Belafonte sang this song on the Muppet Show.

And when Fozzie Bear asked him “what’s this song about?”,
Belafonte said this:

“There really isn’t any difference in any of us, if we take time to understand each other.

The question is, do I know who you are, or who I am?

Do we care about each other?

Because if we do, together we can turn the world around.”

Or – put another way – together we can build the kingdom of God.

In our welcome, and in our being welcomed,

in our inviting, and in our being invited,

in our finding a place at the table,

and in offering a place to everyone else, too...

together we bring this world closer to that vision Christ held out before us –

That vision of a party, a great wedding feast,

filled with joy –

that vision of a table where all find a place.

So -- Happy World Communion Sunday!

Let’s turn the world around, friends,

let’s build the kingdom of God. Amen.