



# First United Church of Oak Park

## Finding God in the Faith of Others

Mark 14:12-16, 22-25

Rev. Beth Dickerson

September 24, 2023

Good morning! My name is Rev. Beth Dickerson. I'm delighted to have been invited to preach this morning. I want to begin with transparency and full disclosure. I was invited to preach of a hero of our faith. One of my favorite authors is Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor. There is a lot I'd like to say about her, and I will include her briefly as part of this sermon, but this sermon seems to have a mind of its own, so I will not be dwelling solely upon her. It's a great theme – heroes of our faith -- and we can all look forward to our preachers returning to this theme with gusto next Sunday.

I am delighted to preach on Worldwide Communion Sunday. It's a great day with a great theme. So, let's talk about Worldwide Communion.

Intro: At a countywide gathering of local religious leaders, someone shouted: "The building is on fire!" Let me tell you what happened next.

- The **Methodists** gathered in the corner and began to discuss and debate the meaning of fire.
- The **Baptists** yelled, "Where's the water?"
- The **Lutherans** posted a notice on the door declaring fire to be evil.
- The **Episcopalians** formed a processional and marched out of the building in decency and order.
- The **Catholics** took pledges to cover the expenses of repairs after the fire.
- The **Pentecostals** praised God and shouted, "Holy Smoke!"
- The **Community Non-Denominationalists** split into three groups and went out and started three new churches.
- The **UCC** church called a congregational meeting to take a vote on what they should do.
- And the **Presbyterians** knew that whatever they did, the outcome had been pre-ordained.

Welcome to the table of diversity on this Worldwide Communion Sunday: the first Sunday in October when Christians from around the world gather to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion.

World Communion Sunday was started in 1940. It was meant to be a way to unify denominations and people through celebrating things we have in common. Presbyterians,

Methodists, Baptists and some other groups began to promote the idea across their mission networks outside the United States so there would be more of a feel of worldwide communion on that day, to join hands and hearts in love and loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Let us never forget at whose table we bow today. If this were an ordinary meal, you could get more food at a backyard barbecue and more excitement tailgating at a ball game. But today we come to profess our faith in salvation of the cross, to claim redemption of the resurrection, and to become one in Christ who has the power to make us one and unified with one another. You see, Christ does not become fragmented in us; rather we become unified in Him. That is why communion matters. Communion is the single most unifying action we do as believers.

This is all fine and good if you have rock-solid faith with an unerring belief in Christianity. But what if you, like so many of us, are at least occasional doubters, who wonder about the veracity of the sometimes hard-to-believe facts of our faith. I'm describing at least some of us here at First United Church, me included. At First United we are encouraged *not* to check our brains at the door. We are urged to examine our beliefs. If we think hard enough about what we believe, this will inevitably lead to at least some uncertainty about our faith. So the question becomes, "How do we become comfortable with our own uncertainty?" How can we be comfortable in a church when we don't necessarily believe everything that our denominational faith and our church profess? What if we are a Christian doubter? Do we belong here in a Christian church as part of a Christian congregation?

The last church I served as a pastor was an American Baptist church. The American Baptist denomination tends to be progressive and this church was progressive to an extreme. I loved this particular congregation despite the fact that when they hired me as their interim pastor I was instructed to seldom if ever mention Jesus from the pulpit. This all turned out to be pretty tricky, as my first day of work was Ash Wednesday, and I was challenged with going all through Lent and Easter without dwelling on Jesus. You see, there were sixteen different faith traditions represented among the members of the congregation. Yes, some people identified as strictly Christian, but others were Hindus and Muslims and Jews, along with quite a few Buddhists and agnostics and atheists sitting in the pews. It was as if sixteen different languages were spoken at this church. Practically all congregants had a foundation in Christianity, just like we all spoke English, but the nuances of their faith beliefs were at times quite different. The chances were pretty slim that the congregation would ever speak each other's faith languages fluently, but we all strove to find the commonalities among our faith traditions by incorporating prayers, music, and faith practices into our shared worship experience. It was both enriching and exciting, and I developed an appreciation and an affinity for faith traditions other than Christianity. And this church continues to thrive despite the fact that the congregation does not agree on a set of basic Christian values, even though they identify as a Christian church and not a Unitarian Church or non-denominational church. They

value diversity, creativity, religious exploration, and religious doubting way above conformity of beliefs.

Speaking of people with differing values, for those of you who were unable to attend the 9:45AM adult education class last Sunday, you missed a potentially important message for our church. There were two presenters last Sunday, Dr. Ben Gierl, a member of our church and a recently retired geriatric psychologist, and Dr. Brenda Ross, a psychology professor from Concordia University. Both were wonderful in what they had to say! Dr. Gierl spoke about loneliness, depression, and bereavement, topics that appeal to a lot of us older members of the congregation, as these are things that many of us are experiencing. Dr. Ross spoke about younger generations – how they are different from their elders and potentially what might attract them to an institution such as a church. (Although Dr. Ross shared with us that younger people today – 20, 30, 40, and even 50-year-olds, are not very much attracted to institutions.) The two presenters contrasted in such a way that illustrates how differently we are going to need to minister to congregants in the future. Just as our faith language is different from tradition to tradition, Dr. Ross spoke about how different our communication language is from generation to generation. As you all know, we of the baby boomer generation speak using our vocal cords. We talk face to face. We call each other on the phone. We expect to go to meetings. We have learned to use electronic communication, texting, twittering, etc. even though we don't love it because it's the easiest way to communicate with our children and grandchildren, who prefer communicating electronically using a number of different platforms.

Dr. Ross shared an important learning for all churches if they are going to thrive: we older people are going to *have* to learn how to communicate electronically. We are sometimes going to do so kicking and screaming, but we will have to learn the new language of communication. Our various generations have very different needs and expectations of our church, which will be a significant challenge for our next pastor. As the Adult Education Committee did last Sunday, we will need to find ways to minister creatively to a variety of different aged parishioners. There is no longer a uniform expectation of what a meaningful church experience might look like. Many of our typical ways of being a church will probably have to go out the window.

Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopalian bishop, college professor and author, in her current bestseller *Holy Envy*, writes about younger people identifying as spiritual but not religious. (Again, we are not talking just about youth. We are talking about 30, 40, and 50-year-olds.) She explains that one of the reasons people do this is because it makes it easier to reconcile their faith with their affection with their non-Christian friends, of which they have many. According to the Christian teaching many people have received from the church through the years, their non-Christian friends will not be allowed to enter the kingdom of heaven - they will roast in hell for all of eternity. Younger people are rejecting this reasoning, leading to rejection of the church.

This is just the tip of the iceberg for the rejection of traditional Christian teachings. Rev. Taylor writes that this is only one of the serious questions that people in our Christian churches are not addressing. She explains, as did Dr. Ross last Sunday, that younger people (defined as non-baby boomers) are looking for more from their communities of faith than a new music program or the assurance that one no longer needs to dress up in order to be welcomed at church. They want meaningful conversation in all modes, including electronic communication, and worship that incorporates faith practices from around the globe. Youngish people are thrilled to discover a religion that does not require a belief in heaven or one whose followers believe God is equally present to those of all faiths along with the belief that right action might be more important to God than right belief. As the future unfolds, we will need to address these important issues as a church if we hope to continue as a worshipping community.

On this Worldwide Communion Sunday, I want to end by being clear about our guidelines for communion here at First United Church. Some questions that occasionally are asked include:

- "Is everyone welcome at the table no matter how fragile their faith?" The answer here at First United Church is YES! We want to assure everyone that all are welcome to take communion as part of our community of faith no matter what they believe or don't believe. We see our communion table as a symbol of love and acceptance. It is a non-judgmental sign of inclusiveness reflecting our belief that we are all God's children.
- "Are children valued as whole persons, worthy to receive the eucharist along with adults?" Yes, here at First United Church all children, no matter what age, are welcome to take communion.
- And lastly, "Do I need to be baptized or do I need to be baptized in a Protestant church to receive communion?" No, you don't need to be baptized to join us in receiving communion. Other religions are respected and baptism in other denominations is accepted here at First United Church. We welcome everyone to take communion, especially the many among us who might have grown up in the Roman Catholic tradition.

To be very, very clear, on this Worldwide Communion Sunday, all are welcome here at the table of God and Jesus Christ.

Amen.