

Together, No the Same          John 17:11, 15-23

It all begins with symbols.

They capture primal relations,  
like, fire and purification,  
seeds and hope.

Stories do not come before the symbols,  
but they emerge from them  
and bring them to life.

The stories explain the symbols,  
and the symbols make the stories  
worth remembering and telling.



Like the story of a white woman  
in a Native American church  
in Robeson County.

You know Robeson, right?  
Lumberton is the county seat  
—Sam Shumate was a pastor there  
for nearly 20 years.  
William Pleasant grew up there.

Robeson County was known for a time  
as one of the poorest  
and most racially divided counties  
in the South.

But back to the story  
of a white woman  
who married a Lumbee  
and found herself in a Native American church.

That kind of thing just didn't happen,  
not back then.

Doomed from the start  
is what people said.

Everybody warned her that a mixed  
marriage just wouldn't last.

Then something horrible happened

—this woman's husband  
and two of her sisters  
were killed in a car wreck.

Devastated doesn't even begin to describe it.

There she was, she said,  
like Ruth, stranded in an alien community.

She walks over

to the stained glass window  
in her church.

It is as a memorial to her husband  
and her sisters.

It portrays two hands clasped beneath a cross.

"See?" she says. "don't you see?"

This stands for all of us.

When I married my husband  
no one approved.

A white woman and an Indian?

Never.

They said it couldn't work.

I would never be accepted.

But this congregation made us one.

See, it's in that window."

The window in the Lumbee church

seems to say to us,

"See under this sign of suffering,  
we will accept one another  
as brothers and sisters."

A congregation lives most deeply  
by its symbol-bearing stories.  
They tell us who we are.<sup>1</sup>

It all begins with symbols.



From cross to font to table.

Our stories come alive in the symbols.

Have you heard Senator John McCain's story  
about when he was POW in Vietnam?

One night his captors bound him  
with excruciatingly tight ropes  
and left him in a cold, dark room  
to suffer alone through the night.

Not long after they departed  
one of the guards came back into the room.  
He did not speak,  
but loosened the ropes and left.  
Just before daybreak,  
he slipped into the room  
and retightened the rope  
before his comrades returned.

Soon thereafter  
Christmas morning dawned on the camp,  
and there McCain stood  
alone in a dusty courtyard.

The same guard walked up  
and stood next to him.

Again, he did not speak.

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<sup>1</sup> Reworked from Richard Lischer, [Open Secrets](#) A Memoir of Faith and Discovery (Broadway Books, New York 2001)

After a few moments he took his sandal  
and scratched a cross in the dirt.  
The two of them stood side by side,  
silently venerating the symbol.  
Then the guard scuffed out the marks  
and left.<sup>2</sup>

It all begins with symbols.

Symbols and their stories move us.  
they bring us together  
whether we are a white woman  
and a Lumbee Native American;  
symbols bring us together  
whether we are a white American soldier  
and a member of Viet Cong;  
our symbols and stories bring us together  
though we are not the same.

But today it is not the symbol of the cross  
or the symbols of praise and adoration  
that I'd like to uphold,  
today it is the table.



This prayer in John's gospel  
was prayed at a table.  
Remember that in John's gospel,  
everything in chapters 13-18  
are spoken, done at table.

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<sup>2</sup> Retold in Kim Long's *The Worshiping Body: The Art of Leading Worship* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY 2009)  
with reference to John McCain on the NPR series, "I Believe," broadcast on October 17, 2005

Remember that as Jesus prays these words,  
he has celebrated  
what was to be the last supper;  
he has washed his disciples feet  
and seen one of his close friends  
run off to betray him.  
Jesus, in chapter 17, is still at the table...  
praying for his friends  
and just as powerful,  
praying for us.

Over and over Jesus prays  
that we might be one  
just as he and God are one.  
It is mentioned 5 times  
in our verses in this chapter.

5 times.  
Can you imagine if you were at the table  
and family member mentioned something  
5 times during the prayer—  
you might clear your throat and say,  
*uh we get the picture.*

But have we?  
Are we one as Christ and God are one?  
Have we gotten the hint  
after all these years?

Did you realize  
that all of Paul's churches  
struggled with learning how to be together?  
How can we be one?  
How can we overcome differences  
that are certainly important  
without them being divisive?

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, *I have a serious concern to bring up with you my friends, using the authority of Jesus, our Master. I'll put it as urgently as I can: You must get along with each other. You must learn to be kind and loving to one another, cultivate a life together.*

How can the church re-think who it is,  
who we are,  
so that it is one as Christ and God are one?

Stanley Hauerwas says,  
“the primary social task of the church  
is to be itself.”<sup>3</sup>

And we can see that the church  
means people who are gathered together,  
though not the same.

If the church is to be together and be a force  
of good news,  
a place of growth and comfort  
a soft place to land in times of trouble  
and a springboard for social justice and change,  
then we will be a community  
together, but not the same.

Somehow the symbol of this place,  
came alive in the story of our being pulled into  
this gospel that we belong here.

This unique gathering of people,  
this the church being itself,  
is our being together but not the same.

Show the Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-NKpDTwMms&t=61s>

That was just too heartwarming  
not to show again.  
And do you know why?  
Because I think there is a deep sense  
of knowing that we can be like that.

It isn't just a chimpanzee  
and black lab named Boot

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Hauerwas. *A Community of Character: Toward A Constructive Christian Social Ethic* ( Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981. p 10)

that can be together!  
We want be together.  
We have this in us!  
And I believe that yearning  
and knowing of being united,  
of being deeply knit together  
is ritually acted out  
and incarnate most  
at the Table.

Who among us  
when we gather for communion  
looks at the person in front us and says,  
“I don’t want to take communion with her,  
she voted for so-and-so.”  
Or, “I don’t want to stand with him  
and go up to the table,  
he drives a gas guzzler and I drive a hybrid.”

I hope you’re balking at the very thought of it!  
No!  
Certainly we don’t do that  
—because when we gather at the table  
it is a symbol, a powerful symbol  
of our being together  
but not having to be the same.

Even the words that we see  
etched symbolically on many tables  
and that we say because Christ said them,  
*Remember me*—has come to mean  
not only the recalling  
of our collective memory  
of Christ giving himself to the world,  
but also that we  
and all the saints of all time  
gather at the Table  
to be re-membered as a body of different parts,  
gathered together

as the one body of Christ.

There are no laws or rules  
about who can come to the table.  
In fact, I don't even think  
you have to be a Christian to come.  
There I said it.  
The table isn't about holding people back,  
it is about welcoming people in.



Have you seen this picture that says,  
when you have more than you need,  
build a bigger table  
not a bigger fence?

That is the church!  
Build a larger table!

Don't add more rules  
about who Christ can love and accept;  
don't add expectations about  
what we have to do to be welcome to the feast!

**Re-member** the body together  
so that as the church  
we can be different and one at the same time.

It wasn't until Vatican II  
that priests were encouraged  
to celebrate the Eucharist  
from behind a free-standing altar,  
(a table for us Protestants)  
facing the people.

For too long  
priests stood with their backs turned on the people  
and muttered, “this is my body,”  
as if performing a magical ritual  
between them and God.

When we stand from behind  
a free-standing table  
the sacrament assumes the character  
of a family meal,  
and the altar becomes a kitchen table.<sup>4</sup>



And if your table is like mine,  
some body loves the green bean casserole  
and someone else loves the broccoli casserole.  
Somebody loves MSNBC  
and someone else loves Fox News.

But nobody has to sit by themselves  
because of the bumper stickers they put on their car  
or the signs they put in their yard.

At our table  
the only rules are  
that you sit down and try.  
Try the food—particularly our 4 yr. old—just try.

We sit down,  
because being together  
is important.  
Isn't that what we could say

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Lischer, Open Secrets A Memoir of Faith and Discovery (Broadway Books, New York 2001)

about this table?

Just try,

try to do the hard work  
of loving each other like a family  
because that is exactly what you are.  
Just try to be together,  
try to be one,  
no one is asking us to be the same.

Oneness does not equal sameness

—any one that has ever said *I do*,  
can testify to that.

Oneness is about love,  
first and foremost.

It is about the commitment  
to do the hard work of *being together*.

Is your marriage wrapped up  
in a diamond or a beautiful, shiny gold band?

No, it is a **symbol** of oneness:  
your being together, not the same.

Peter Wallace says, “I don’t think Jesus  
expects his followers

to look, speak,  
or behave like one another.

That may seem an attractive goal  
in some sense,  
but it’s not authentic.

It only serves to make us feel  
artificially safe

from having to make hard decisions  
and grapple with difficult truths.

God created us with different personalities,  
interests, and opinions...

God draws people together by the Spirit  
and gives us courage to accept each other,  
enjoy each other,  
and learn from each other

--despite our differences.”<sup>5</sup>

The table, you see, is a family-friendly  
piece of furniture.

It becomes a symbol of finding a home  
in each other,  
of being together, not same.

One of my absolute favorite movie clips  
of all time and space  
is from the movie Antwone Fisher.

In fact I have probably shown it to you before,  
and even though I have seen it a thousand times,  
it gets through to my heart every time,  
because the table is a powerful symbol.

Antwone was a child in the foster care system  
and always longed to find his family.

When he was little  
he would have a dream  
over and over  
of meeting his family  
who were gathered for dinner  
and there would be all his favorite foods,  
especially pancakes.

This scene from the movie  
is when Antwone as an adult  
meets his family for the very first time.  
Listen as he is pulled in the door,  
pulled into the family to be one of them,  
not the same,  
but now finally together.

They introduce themselves,  
*I'm your aunt,*  
*I'm your cousin,*  
*My daddy named me after your father...*

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Wallace, That They May All be One <http://day1.org/1394-that-they-may-all-be-one>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jTQMR1lsiGw>



Surely this is what Christ prayed for.  
That we would be one,  
that we would be together  
here at the table  
and in the world  
just as our gracious Lord, God and Spirit  
are one,  
together but not the same.

Surely this is what Christ prayed  
that as we gather at the table  
--saying try, just try--  
try and hold onto each other,  
offer the welcome in my name,  
pull each other deeper into this family  
—look at each other in the eye  
together but not the same.

A congregation lives most deeply  
by its symbol-bearing stories.  
They tell us who we are.<sup>6</sup>  
So church, looking at this table, can we tell who we are?  
Are we ready to tell the world who we are?

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Lischer, Open Secrets A Memoir of Faith and Discovery (Broadway Books, New York 2001)

## **Benediction**

*John McCutcheon Song: play the first minute then lower volume during benediction and then when done, turn volume up again.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ia4q-pGNnA> John McCutcheon Calling All the Children Home

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, I have a serious concern to bring up with you my friends, using the authority of Jesus, our Master. I'll put it as urgently as I can: You must get along with each other. You must learn to be kind and loving to one another, cultivate a life together.

See? Together, but not the same. We are all called here, home to the table and the big black pot, everybody's got enough though we ain't got a lot, no one is forgotten no is alone...