

The late Bill Pannell, who taught preaching at Fuller Theological Seminary, once said that if the great question at the time of the reformation was “Where do I find a gracious God?...the great question of our time is “Where can I find a gracious neighbor?”

Harry Nilsson, songwriter/poet, said it this way, *One is the loneliest number you'll ever do.*

Like that sixth grader's first day at a new school and it's lunch time and you're looking for a place at a table...or those throughout our history who have been denied a seat at any table because of racism or ageism or sexism or any of those other 'isms that deny our common humanity...or hear the mother sitting at an empty table in an apartment just blocks from here wondering how she'll feed her children...or listen to that veteran who suffers depression as he sips a Starbucks all alone at the corner of College and Broad watching smiling, happy people walk by...can you hear those families stranded in Somalia when the invitation to a new home was taken away; or you're looking across the kitchen table to an empty chair after fifty-something years of marriage.

There are too many people in our world who do that number 'one alone' – and they wonder and worry, “Where can I find a gracious neighbor?”

I believe the answer to that question is the answer to Jesus' prayer.

As we worship and celebrate Communion today, we are those whom Jesus prayed about – that instead of “One is the loneliest number” – which is the world he died for – what he prays is “One is the onliest number....”

One is the onliest number; if Jesus counts for anything, that's the number he does – that we may be one.

Just as Jesus and his Father are one, if you want to see what God is like, look at Jesus – unity, community, communion.

The essence of Jesus' prayer is relationship – the body of Christ, friends of Jesus – however we say it – that we may be one.

And he's clear about the purpose – One is the onliest number so that the world will see through Jesus, God loves the world.

Paul is writing that each of us is given gifts for this one purpose – serving and sharing the love of God in Christ as the body of Christ...

And if we are the body of Christ, one with him, there ought to be a family resemblance, don't you think?

Start with Christ's head! The power of the mind, creative imagination of God's power to change us and our world for the better.

Our hands like Christ's hands! As someone told me, “When it comes to reconciliation, I am called to extend the hand of reconciliation. I don't know about the other person, but I have to extend my hand if reconciliation will happen.”

Our voice to sound like Christ's voice!
Comforting words to those in need, condemning words to the evil in our world.

To have Christ's feet! To go wherever he sends us, to find whoever needs us.

Christ's ears to be our ears! To listen for those who hurt, who cry out in the darkness of their despair of being alone in their suffering.

To have Christ's heart! To care, to love, to encourage, to forgive, the compassion of God for all creation – as God so loved the world, so we love as God first loved us.

The Lord's Table is not only where we see what it means to **be** the body of Christ, but it's also where we practice to go and **do**, what it means to go and live as the body of Christ.

"One is the onliest number you'll ever do" - that's what Jesus is praying for.

For most of the life I can remember growing up, my father's family – aunts, uncles, cousins – would gather on the second Sunday of each month at my Lancaster grandparents' house for Sunday dinner – the grand, after church meal.

Adults and older cousins in the dining room, children in the kitchen at the yellow, formica-topped table.

I had been allowed to move out of the kitchen when I was twelve – to the adult table – sort of a Southern style bar mitzvah!

My grandmother went back and forth from the kitchen to the tables making sure everybody got enough – my grandfather at the head of the table, an aunt next to him, three sons and their wives, two other daughters and their husbands, just like church – everyone had their place to sit.

As I grew up and grew away from sitting at that table in my grandparents' dining room – I had learned how much I loved them, how much they loved me.

What I learned about God while sitting around that table is what's at issue in the incarnation – God's love becomes human in Jesus, a man who lives and breathes and eats and laughs and sits at table with his family, with his friends.

And this is the great good news of what Jesus prays for in our Scripture lesson. The disciples are learning about their relationship with each other, about their relationship with Jesus, what God is saying to them in the here and now with Jesus as they have shared with him at the table.

That's what's at stake for you and me as we come to this table – what do we learn about our relationship with each other, with Jesus, what is

God is saying to us in the here and now, and what will we take with us when we leave here?

Because I also learned that it was only at that table that some of those people would talk to each other.

Maybe you understand how it is in families where in-laws can be outlaws with some in the family, and it's no mystery why they don't get along – but the fact is, there they were on that second Sunday around that table, and that is the mystery.

For one brief moment each month, they would come together – my grandmother would serve them in her gracious way, in spite of all that kept them worlds apart the rest of the time – around that table, they would serve each other, sharing a space together, a moment of reconciliation – of what it means to be in communion – one with each other.

For just a few brief moments of sharing and serving, those people were living the friendship of Jesus Christ – not an illusory escape from their world or worlds apart, not a momentary truce from their nit-picking, infighting, gossipy ways – but a personal experience of God's love in Jesus Christ as lived by Jesus' friend, my grandmother who served us all, who loved us all.

Ken Medema, in a verse from one of his songs, describes what's at stake for us: *I said that I don't know much about friendship; I need someone to show me that friends can really be true; So, don't tell me I got a friend in Jesus; Without showing me at first that I've got a friend in you.*

In these moments of sharing and serving, we are living the friendship of Jesus Christ – not an illusory escape from our world or worlds apart, not a momentary truce from our nit-picking, infighting, gossipy ways – but a personal experience of God's love in Jesus Christ who calls us to be one in him.

I pray that as you are served from this table, what you receive will only whet your appetite for more - to be fed with the bread of life and to drink from the cup of salvation.

But not only a word of comfort, there is also a word of challenge about our invitation to be at this table.

We live, I think, in a culture that celebrates the right of the individual to have a choice. And I revel in that as much as anybody, so I'm not trying to say it's a bad thing. We have massive choice.

We choose our friends, confirm or reject - We choose things - clothes, cars, things for the house, things that express who we are, how we want the world to see us, what makes us feel good somehow.

Consumerism thrives on it. We can become spoiled for choice; it's why buffets are so popular.

Maybe we try to do it at this table: Where we are consumers of religion - we each choose the kind of God that feeds our own particular way of life.

But the Lord's Supper is not a buffet for us to look and choose what feeds our religious appetite, as picky as it might be.

We learn at this table what John Calvin wrote of God's love: "That it is a love that persistently and invincibly pursues the distraught and the alienated."

For the church at this time and this place, in the midst of the violence and hatred and fearmongering and lies we see and hear daily, the credibility of the gospel of Jesus Christ largely rests on our being a community of gracious neighbors in an often friendless and graceless world.

As people of faith, we know that peace, understanding and hope can flourish and grow only as we affirm God's love is for all people...

One is the onliest number that we'll ever do as the body of Christ.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.