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Roland Park Presbyterian Church
Ordinary 27 (Year A-08)

Philippians 3: 4b-14

“Comfortable Enough to be Challenged”

Today is World Communion Sunday. As you can read in our bulletin its origins can be traced back to 1933 and the Rev. Hugh T. Kerr, pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian in Pittsburgh and the father of our pastor emeritus Dr. Don Kerr. The idea was then and is now to celebrate our unity in Christ, across the world and across barriers of denomination and differences in theology. So as we gather around the Lord’s Table today, here at Roland Park Presbyterian, we do so with the awareness that Christians the world over are also gathered around the Lord’s Table where we all are nourished for the life of faith.

It would be nice to think that we are so globally-minded and outward focused in our faith as to make a day like this needless. It would be nice, but not true. All too often the church acts like a “holy huddle.” You know what a huddle is, right? It is a group of people who gather together by forming a circle. They face each other so that everyone in the circle can see everyone else in the circle, but the problem is that when you form a huddle you turn your back on everything and everyone that is outside of your circle. You become inward focused and, even though it may not be your intention, all of your concerns are right there in the circle with you.

A holy huddle, is that what the church is? Or is it something more. This day, this celebration of communion world wide would seem to indicate that a large part of our focus should be outward, that a closed circle is not the proper posture for the church. But notice how easy it is to fall into a holy huddle. You don’t have to have

bad or selfish intentions to do it. In fact, the intentions can be very good ones. We want to get to know one another better. We want to build community and relationship with those in the pew next to us. Great! These are good things, of course. But they are not the only things. Or it can take the form of self-survival. This is a position many churches are in today with declining attendance and contribution numbers. The concern becomes how will we ensure that this very important institution is carried into the future. After all, we can't serve others if the church ceases to exist. Again, it is not wrong to concentrate on making the organization sustainable, but one of the things that makes the church different from any other organization is that we place our trust in God alone for our future. This, ideally, releases us from worry of survival. We are called to continue being the church.

One of the clearest ways we can determine where our focus is, if it is primarily inward or outward is by listening to our own prayers. The lead singer of the Irish rock band U2, Bono, tells of a turning point in his own faith journey. Bono is one of those who thinks of the church as a holy huddle, but then he realized that he was just as guilty of being inward focused: *A number of years ago, I met a wise man who changed my life -- in countless ways, big and small. I was always seeking the Lord's blessing. I - I'd be saying, "Look, I've got a new song...Would you look out [for it]. I have a family; I'm going away on tour -- please look after them. I have this crazy idea. Could I have a blessing on it." And this wise man asked me to stop. He said, "Stop asking God to bless what you're doing. Get involved in what God is doing -- because it's already blessed.*

In today's passage, Paul is writing to the church in city of Philippi. As was typical of most churches of the time, the church in Philippi was inward focused. They were focused on their own squabbles and troubles amongst each other. They were focused mostly on issues of their own salvation. Who was in and who was not? How could they know if they were in or out?

Paul's message is to stop; stop worrying about if *you have* Jesus, because Jesus' message is that God has claimed you. That is what defines us and should be our focus, Paul says, and in comparison everything else that we try make our focus is rubbish. (An interesting note of translation: Paul doesn't say rubbish here. He actually uses a much more profane word to emphasize how little everything else matters next to the knowledge that Christ has made us his own. Our translations just clean up the language a bit...I'll let you use your imagination!)

So, the question for us on this World Communion Sunday is where is our focus and where is our comfort? Are we willing to fully trust ourselves to God so that our energies can be devoted elsewhere? Do we believe that we are really that important to God, that we are so completely loved? How would our lives be different if we truly believed and truly trusted that God loves us no matter what? Would we spend one more minute worrying about the national economy or our own budgets?

Alright, Mark, now let's come back down to earth. You've gone too far. It's too much to expect that we wouldn't worry about ourselves, especially during these trying times. Moreover, if the church didn't worry about its survival at least a little bit, it would fall apart. We can't let that happen.

I know. Maybe I got carried away. Maybe the way of life Paul is advocating for is not really within our reach just yet, but then again, maybe it's not as far of as we sometimes fear either. Maybe we can begin by turning around, at least every once in a while, so that our focus is not always inward, but give ourselves a chance to notice that there is a whole world full of people out there who are hungry in more ways than one. Maybe, just maybe we can work with each other and show one another that there is a God who loves and has claimed us, and that this God is desperate for us to share this love not only with one another, but with a whole world full of people, as crazy and outlandish as that may sound. If we are ready to at least entertain that possibility then we have come to the right place, on the right day; for it is here, at our Lord's table, where we learn our true identity as invited guests at a table of full of grace.

Let us pray: We do not presume to come to your table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own goodness, but in your all-embracing love and mercy. We are not worthy even to gather up the crumbs under your table, but it is your nature always to have mercy. So show us your love and nourish us through your grace, that we may press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen. (Adapted from the *Book of Common Worship*).