

**“A WINDOW ON THE WORLD”**  
**Isaiah 25:6-10; Revelation 7:9-10**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**October 4, 2020**  
**World Communion Sunday**

The past few months have been filled with sobering milestones and memorials, not the least of which was our annual remembrance of 9/11. Three weeks ago, we observed the 19<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the terrorist attacks upon the United States, events that forever altered America’s landscape.

In my recent reading I was reminded of one feature of that landscape which completely disappeared that day. On the top two floors of the North Tower of the World Trade Center, there was a restaurant called “Windows on the World” – so named because it had floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out in every direction on the bustling world below. No doubt diners also looked at each other and at the gourmet food laid out before them, but much of their attention was drawn to the windows and the spectacular sights they were able to see through those windows – a panoramic view where “on a clear day you could see forever”; ships and planes coming to New York from every corner of the globe; a dense forest of buildings occupied by millions of people. A table in that restaurant truly provided a window on the world.

Today, that restaurant is sadly gone, but you and I still have many other windows through which we can see the outside world. Windows are important to us: they permit sunlight to enter our living space; they invite us to look beyond where we are and establish a connection to other people and places. Perhaps we have worked in an office that had all walls and no windows, and we know how confining that can feel. When we vacation in a hotel or on a cruise ship, we prefer a room with a view. The screens on our TV’s, computers, and cellphones also provide windows on the world. They connect us instantly with human beings and happenings half-way around the globe. It would seem that you and I love windows and can’t live without them.

But in fact, we have ambivalent feelings about these glass gateways to the outside world. There are times when we want to pull the drapes or shutter our windows completely. The world around us has become so complex and so turbulent that we simply don’t want to see it. A pundit offered an observation on the staggering events that have transpired over the past few days: “Sometimes you go a decade and nothing happens; sometimes a decade happens in one week.” He was referring, of course, to the fight over a Supreme Court nominee, a chaotic presidential debate, a spike in COVID cases, and the Chief Executive of the United States contracting the virus himself. You and I can easily feel overwhelmed and wish to shut everything out. We don’t want windows on the world because the world looks ugly and menacing. Better to barricade ourselves in a room which has no view.

Or, sometimes we just get comfortable in our own space and don’t want to look beyond it. We feel cozy with people who are like us – the culture to which we are accustomed, the town where we live, and the church to which we belong – and feel no need to expand our horizons. Yes, our own place certainly matters. It is the unique locale of our lives and our service to God, but it can also constrict our vision. The persistent risk in centering ourselves with particular people in a

particular place is that we begin to think that our place is the only place or that our place is the measure of all other places. As a local church, we try to take seriously our own context for ministry – our needs as a congregation and the needs of our immediate community. But when we have no windows enabling us to look outside our own walls or refuse to look through the windows we do have, we lose our connection to the larger world around us. This can reinforce our sinful tendency toward racism, nativism, and a sense of cultural superiority.

I once served a church in the deep South that was only 15 years old at the time I went there. I learned that when they designed their new sanctuary, they carefully considered their options for windows. They thought about installing stained glass, which would permit some sunlight and flood the sanctuary with a rainbow of color; but they chose instead to install clear glass, which invited worshipers to look out and passersby to look in. The choice was deliberate and symbolic: that church wanted a connection to the outside world.

You won't be surprised that when I got my first look at the sanctuary of the Woodbury United Methodist Church, one of the first things I noticed was the clear glass windows. When you and I look out these windows, what we see is not a distraction from worship; it is an invitation to ministry. And when our neighbors look inside these windows, what we want them to see is a fellowship that loves God and cares deeply for them.

While I was on spiritual retreat three weeks ago, I read a book by James Harnish, a retired Methodist minister in Florida. One chapter of his book became the inspiration for this sermon. Harnish tells about spending a weekend with friends who had recently returned from Vietnam where they served as missionaries. They were now serving a tiny, poverty-stricken coal-mining community in the hills of Eastern Kentucky. When Harnish noticed copies of *National Geographic Magazine* on their coffee table, they said they wanted their children to grow up with visual reminders that they were part of something bigger than their own corner of creation. It was their table with a window on the world.

The prophet Isaiah experiences a vision of that kind of table as he dreams of a day when the Lord will host a lavish banquet for “all peoples” (Isaiah 25:6). On that day the Lord will remove the shroud of death from “all nations” (25:7) and will wipe tears from the eyes of “every face” (25:8). Isaiah declares this vision to the citizens of ancient Israel, who have a tendency to look inward and hoard their status as God's chosen people. Isaiah points them instead to a window looking out on the wider world, and to a table big enough to seat all of God's children.

The apostle John catches the same vision when he sees “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9). While you and I live and serve in a particular place, John reminds us that the biblical vision of heaven is more like the United Nations than any individual race, culture, or country. If we don't like being among people who are different from those we see in the mirror, heaven might not be the place for us. James Harnish writes: “I'm convinced that hell is individual isolation in which our lives shrink down into the most miniscule remainder of our narrow self-interest.” By contrast, heaven is an expansive, inclusive place – a place as variegated as humanity itself. And we see heaven not through a mirror, but through a window.

Friends, has it ever occurred to you that the Table of our Lord is a window on the whole, wide, wonderful, wounded world? In his famous Aldersgate conversion, John Wesley had an

intensely personal experience of the grace of Jesus Christ. He later wrote: “an assurance was given me that Christ had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” But for Wesley, it was not “all about me”; he also had a window on the world. He knew that every person on this planet is a person for whom Christ died. At this Table, the broken body and shed blood are offered to everyone.

Likewise, when we gather around this Table in our particular place, we are united with Jesus’ followers in every place – people whose faces we will never see and whose names we will never know, but sisters and brothers with whom we “are one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, “Word and Table: Service 1”).

The invitation comes from Christ our Lord, “who invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.” It is a table that looks at the whole world through the window of God’s all-embracing love. On this World Communion Sunday, our window is open, and so is our table!