

# Healing the wounds of the nations: towards a common mission of the Churches<sup>1</sup>

Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz<sup>2</sup>

Bremen, Germany

## Abstract

*In what ways can the Churches be – or become – healing agents for their people? The article argues that churches are communities of remembering. And as remembering centers around the Crucified, the “wounded” (H Nouwen), it becomes a re-remembering energy, i.e. an energy that unites what has been dismembered. It is argued that one of the most destructive aspects of contemporary societies is the “winner-syndrome”. By regarding human beings as “winners” and “losers” it sets in motion merciless struggles for the “top-position” which turn out to be processes of denial and exclusion and create a downward spiral of violence. The churches’ ecumenical healing ministries should begin by dismantling the matrix of denial and violence in order to create a “matrix of connectedness” that is grounded in the basic woundedness of all human beings. The author participated in the Harare Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1998) and sees his reflections as a contribution to the “Decade to Overcome Violence” which is to begin 2001.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either

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<sup>1</sup> The following is a slightly changed version of the James-Hair-Memorial-Lecture that I gave on March 2, 1999, in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz is a Lutheran theologian from Germany with a varied career in ecumenical work. In the seventies he worked for the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches; in the eighties he was Director of one of Germany’s Protestant Academies before he went to Costa Rica, Central America to teach Ecumenical Theology and Ethics. He now lives in Bremen, Germany and works as an ecumenical consultant and freelance journalist with frequent teaching requests in many countries. Among his recent publications is *The Art of Forgiveness*, Geneva 1997. His forthcoming book with the title *The Kingdom and the Power* is on the theology of Jürgen Moltmann (SCM/Fortress Press, 2000).

side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations” (Rv 20:1-2).

This is part of the vision with which the New Testament ends: at its center the New Jerusalem, the city of peace, built in the radiant light of God and of the Lamb, attracting the peoples from around the *oikoumene*, sustaining them with the abundant waters of the river of life, healing them with the leaves of the tree of life, all year round.

It is a vision too beautiful to be true, a vision so glorious that it makes me sad. Because this is heaven, this is utterly out of this world. How will it ever make it into our troubled and murky history? And yet it is also true: “Where there is no vision, the people perish”. But what kind of vision is required to be encouraging, to sustain us, our churches and peoples?

## 2. METAPHORS HAVE THEIR LIMITATIONS

We are here to reflect on the healing of our nations’ wounds, and we are challenged to do so as members of different, and divided churches. Let’s face it: This theme is quite a mouthful. What could we possibly say that will not sound exotically unrealistic or piously irrelevant?

The first thing to get some clarity about is the *metaphoric character of the theme*. “Healing” the “wounds” of the “nations” – we are dealing here with three metaphors. “Healing” and “wounds” are images from the world of medicine; they center around the body or the corporate self of persons. A person can suffer from a variety of wounds, some visible and outward and others invisible and hidden. And according to these various forms of impairment and damage a great variety of therapies has been developed.

The more the experts understand of the intricacies of our bodies and psychic dispositions the more reluctant they become to talk about “healing”. Who would dare call him/herself a “healer”? For to be healed means to be whole, to be restored to our full integrity, to be in perfect harmony with all our gifts and energies. Looking at it this way, who would ever consider him/herself healed? At best we hope that the doctors will help us to maintain some functional integrity and to make the best of our age.

Further, to use the word “healing” in relation to the “wounds of nations” means to carry an image from the field of medicine over to the realm of politics and to equate a

large social institution with a “body”, that is to suggest a corporateness and “bodiliness” that does not exist. What we call “nations” are social and historical constructs, composed of a great variety of ethnic entities, clans and other groupings, each with their particular traditions, customs, and cultures. We are well advised to underline the open-endedness and fluidity in our understanding of “nations”, firstly because nobody really knows what a “nation” is except in the constitutional sense of statehood, and secondly because we are getting very quickly very close to fascist ideas once we regard the “nation” as a “body” within which each citizen has to understand him/herself as a tiny cell.<sup>3</sup>

So much about the risks and limitations of the images of our theme. But having said that we must also add that it is possible, and indeed necessary, of talking about “wounds” in our nations’ lives. It is a metaphoric way to refer to manifest conflicts that tear nations apart, such as civil wars, gross economic disparities, territorial divisions etcetera. It is also a way of speaking about more obscure crises such as racism, xenophobia, or corruption. But then it is also necessary to see the hidden wounds that refer to severe irritation and confusion with regard to our very identity as nations. And it is with these hidden “wounds” that I want to concern myself.

### **3. WHAT ABOUT CHURCHES AS HEALING AGENTS?**

The subtheme suggests that our churches should be moving towards a common healing mission. Is this not an assumption to be regarded with profound scepticism? Are we not all victims and witnesses of churches that have been great dividers or at least that have organized themselves along ethnic divides, social or cultural borderlines? It would be foolish to deny this grim reality.

At the same time it is true to say that, throughout history, the churches have exercised healing ministries of various sorts. They were the first in Europe to look after the sick and outcast. Some of them have been forceful agents in the fight against slavery and other forms of discrimination, but many were reluctant. A few of them have risked their very existence in the pursuit of a peaceful and non-violent life, but the majority has condoned wars for too long.

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<sup>3</sup> Hundred years ago, the French Ernest Renan said: “Une nation est donc une grande solidarité, constituée par le sentiment des sacrifices qu’on a faits et de ceux qu’on est disposé à faire encore” (1882).

The ecumenical movement of this century owes a considerable part of its momentum to this commitment to healing. We might well refer to efforts of healing in mission work; we can refer to pacifist and peace-making initiatives that would be inconceivable without committed ecumenical intervention. We have a significant record of solidarity work for churches and societies in economic and social distress, for refugees and displaced persons; we are beginning to wake up to our responsibility for the endangered earth herself.

But even so, there is this gaping wound that keeps our churches divided. We do not celebrate the eucharist, the Lord's Supper, together. The recent General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Harare provided yet another example of this bitter fact. At a Sunday during the Assembly we were all shipped to four or five different churches in town to celebrate our different eucharists there. What does this say about our authority to present ourselves as healing agents to our peoples and nations? Are we not far too wounded to be able to heal?

And yet, at the very end of the Assembly, and on the stubborn insistence of a Mennonite delegate, it was decided to make the first ten years of the next millennium a "Decade to Overcome Violence". Hence both are there, the awareness of our brokenness and the commitment to some kind of healing ministry.

#### **4. AT THE CENTER OF FAITH: THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST**

He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows, yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

(Is 53:3-5, KJV)

From the early days of Christianity these words about the unknown Suffering Servant have been understood to point to Jesus of Nazareth. Whenever and wherever we meet in order to open the Bible we remember the life and death, the cross and the resurrection of the One whom we believe to have carried our sorrows. Christian communities are communities of remembering. Whom do they remember? The One who is acquainted with grief. What does this entail?

It has often been said that we would come closer to each other if we got closer to Jesus. I am convinced that this is true, if not in the sense that Jesus is a historical figure in whom our different approaches converge. As we have seen from history, this historical figure can be interpreted in a thousand different ways. I believe that the connecting moment is reached when we enter into the mystery of why Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, the earthly image of the invisible ground of our being.

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter ...” (Is 53, 6f)

The mystery is that in Jesus the Christ we are confronted with a God who takes our iniquities upon Godself. Why is this?

The suffering God or, to use the title of Jürgen Moltmann’s influential book, the *Crucified God*, is at the center of our faith. Difficult to put into words, only to be described in dialectical formulations, our faith centers on the revelation of a love so great that it takes into itself all our enmity and guilt, our violence and frustration, our sorrows and grief. It is the revelation of a love so almighty that it encompasses even death, even the death of the One who felt utterly forsaken. It is the love revealed in the prayer of the crucified: “Father, forgive, they do not know what they are doing.”

The river of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb is the power of redeeming love, the power of forgiveness. You see, the massive reality of guilt and grief is acknowledged; for the Son is crucified. But this guilt and grief is taken up within God; for the crucified is the resurrected one and sits at the right hand of God, to plead our cause.

There is no denial of injustices and grievances; they are present in the stark reality of the Cross. And yet they are not used in order to fuel new injustices and grievances: the mechanism of retaliation is broken. Jesus does not step down from the cross in order to take revenge. With outstretched arms he endures the pain and anger, he takes upon himself the bitterness and alienation. In his cross the repetitive cycle of violence is suspended, is hanging in the air, as it were. His love consumes our violence. This is, in St John's incredible phrase, the "glory of the cross". This is why Bonhoeffer, in the agony of his death cell, confesses: "Only the suffering God can help us."

## **5. HEALING IN THE LIGHT OF WOUNDEDNESS**

I said that Christian communities are communities of remembering. In our muddled and murky ways we are groping for the mystery, as I have just tried to do, of a God who knows our woundedness by heart. And because God is acquainted with our grief, familiar with our iniquities, embracing our god-forsakenness and godlessness, there is no reason anymore to hide this reality from ourselves. Let's face it! This is the way we are, haunted by anxiety and anger, driven by foolishness and fury, dead-locked in retaliation and revenge. This is the way we human beings are. In the mirror of God's forgiving love, let us face the truth about ourselves as human beings. (If it wasn't for this love we would be unable to face it; for we would have to hate ourselves too much!) As we draw close to the crucified God we remember our woundedness.

So, at the deepest level, we are communities of remembering our woundedness. I call this "deep remembering", and that is for me the beginning of healing.

For if we were to admit the truth about our human condition there would be no need to hide behind the walls of self-righteousness. This would put an end to our tendencies to punish others for our own failures, to idolize our heroes and to satanize our enemies. To admit our common woundedness would help us to affirm our common humanity, and this deep awareness would enable us to see through, and to reach across, the borderlines and divisions with which we seek to maintain and stabilize our identities.

Yes, of course, we read (in Mt 9:12) the words of Jesus: "It is not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick". We hear him call to himself all who are downtrodden and heavily laden, but we do not wish to realize that he is talking about us. We want to be

strong and healthy, we want to appear fully capable of handling our load ourselves. Our pretense is to be perfectly capable of managing our lives on our own. What do we need the crucified for?

If, however, as Christian communities, in our deep remembering, we would permit the Crucified to reveal the very nature of our lives, which is the fact that we do not know how to handle things, we would be led to offer to the world an alternative. In the light of the Christ we would discover the truth of the Beatitude that the "meek, or the humble and gentle, are the blessed ones who will inherit the earth". It is not the tough guys, the self-centered, the arrogant and brutal ones, who are able to run things. Their way of running the affairs of the world is a curse; for they wreak havoc on the earth.

There is nothing wrong with strong, energetic and committed people, but things go wrong when such strength is grounded on the pretense of invincibility and invulnerability. I think it is much better to affirm a kind of strength that is rooted in the awareness of our woundedness.

What would happen to our church communities if we were to approach our divisions with this awareness, that our presumed strength separates us whereas our shared woundedness would unite us? Would this not enable us to recognize ourselves, and our own troubles, in the other, across the divide?

This deep remembering challenges our accustomed ways of remembering. We have been brought up to remember our particular past, represented by our mothers and fathers and by all those who have nurtured us with their faith. Behind them are those whom we consider to be the venerated teachers and interpreters of our particular traditions. In many subtle ways they have shaped the ways in which we approach the formative centuries of the Christian faith and, lastly, the ways in which we read the Holy Scriptures.

These ways of selective remembering are shaped by our different traditions, and these are in turn reshaped and reinforced by our remembering. It is as if we in our traditions had drilled different wells to tap the life-giving waters in the depths of history. And we seem to be quite convinced that the quality of water we are getting from our respective wells is much better than that others are drawing from theirs.

This helps us to see the dark side of our selective remembering. For we do not only remember the great gifts of our fathers and mothers of the faith. We also keep in mind the traumatic events that occurred in our history. And we are mindful of who did that to us! As we are led to admire those who represent our particular tradition, we are also, often without realizing it, led to be doubtful, suspicious and at times even contemptible of the others.

Hence, we remember the light and the darkness of our past, the blessings and the hurts, the grace and the grievance that has brought us to be the kinds of communities we are. We prefer to remember when and where we have been hurt by the others and we tend to overlook the instances when and where we have offended and hurt the other. It is this unacknowledged dark side of our remembering that keeps us apart from each other.

I have often felt that even after all the years in the ecumenical movement we have not yet begun to tell each other of these sinister and unredeemed memories. We have not yet begun to reveal to each other the lasting traumatic events, the hurting points in our past that keep nourishing our distrust. It is an admirable task to work through our various doctrinal differences and to come up with connecting formulae. But what have we achieved thus far? A convergence in the head, but no convergence of the heart.

Crystalclear is the water of the river of life that is flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, says the Book of Revelations. But murky are the waters that are flowing through the channels and pipes of our separated and divided traditions. They are murky not because we want it that way, but because our selective remembering obscures our vision.

## **6. OVERCOMING DENIAL: ALTERNATIVES TO THE “WINNER-SYNDROME”**

The world is run by people, mostly men, who are out of touch with their innermost woundedness. The woundedness is there, of course, but it dare not and cannot be recognized as such. Therefore it must be denied. The images of greatness and power, of toughness and determination, are intricately connected with denial. This is a personal problem, it is a male problem, and it is a problem of entire nations.



*Fifty Years of Denial* is the subtitle of Robert Lifton and Greg Mitchell's book *Hiroshima in America*. It tells the story of the exhibition which the Smithsonian Institute in Washington wanted to display in 1995 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The plan was "to put on display the *Enola Gay*, the plane that carried the first atomic bomb over Japan, and ... an exhibit around it that would fully explore the decision to use the bomb, and its effects. They would both present the justifications for, and doubts about, the atomic attack, based on the latest scholarship; and they would not flinch from showing what happened at ground zero."<sup>4</sup> When these plans were published they met with such sharp criticism by organizations of World War II veterans and government officials that the exhibition had to be cancelled altogether. Lifton and Mitchell show that the "official narrative" of the atomic attack was constructed and kept alive to affirm the image of a decent nation of which every American could be proud and to dispel the deep-seated doubts about the necessity and morality of this momentous decision which, after all, marks the beginning of the atomic age.

The doubts are there, the two authors underline, or in the terms of this talk: the wound is there, but the nation does not know how to live with it. To admit that the bombing was wrong and unnecessary would be too painful for a people that is used to regard itself as the great defender of all that is decent, right and good. And so this truth has to be denied. But what is the psychological, the social and the political cost of living with denial? It means living with half-truths, with suppressed uncertainties, with unacknowledged doubts. And so a seemingly paradoxical thing happens: a shadow falls on what is in fact decent, right and good. For decency, goodness and a sense of right and wrong are not destroyed by the admission that there is also guilt and failure. On the contrary. Such virtues are based on the humble awareness that there is in the life of human communities no such thing as innocence.

I speak to you as someone who belongs to a nation that is groping for a way to live with its terrible wounds, the wounds of guilt and pain. The legacies of the Third Reich keep haunting us. A research institute based in Hamburg has set up an exhibit that is now being shown in many different German cities. And wherever it goes it provokes

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<sup>4</sup> Lifton, R J & Mitchell, Gr 1995, *Hiroshima in America*, pxii. New York: G P Putnam.

bitter debates; for it deals with the crimes of the German Wehrmacht during World War II. There are many old Germans who are bitterly opposed to this exhibition. They say that it is an exhibitionist and masochistic indulgence in shame which would destroy the last remnants of decency and self-respect in our nation. They are eager to point out that, although Hitler's special troops such as the SS did atrocious things, the Wehrmacht did uphold some standard of honor. This is partly true, but the other gruesome part is also true. I went to see the exhibition. It was painful to face it, but on the whole I think better than to deny it. It reinforced my pacifist commitment, for any war brings out the worst in human beings.

There is also a troubled debate in my country about the question of what kind of Holocaust memorial we should have in Berlin. How are we to remember what is too shameful to bear? How are the younger generations of Germans to remember the Third Reich while at the same time looking for a chance to be regarded as citizens of a relatively normal state?

Is "normality" linked to denial? Does it grow out of a profound sense of truth? Honor and honesty are one. And the wounds of a nation will only begin to lose their painfulness once they are admitted. This kind of remembering is the beginning of liberation, while denial prolongs captivity.

There are Germans who are asking: While we admit that there was a brutal singularity about the Nazi crimes, are we going to be the evil ones forever? Is pointing to our shame a means for our neighbors to deny whatever shame there is in their histories?

It would be so much easier for many German people to leave the trenches of denial if there were Christian communities worldwide that would speak out clearly in favor of our shared condition. It did happen in 1945, when the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, expressed by leading men of the Protestant Churches, was received and acknowledged by representatives of the ecumenical movement. It opened the way for a renewed community, for it enabled the ecumenical visitors to free themselves from their profound anger and hurt. So it was something of a mutual liberation. When St Paul says that there is "no one who is righteous, no, not one" (Rm 3:10) he is offering the basis for a new realism that helps us to affirm our common humanity and to overcome denial.

Why am I worried about the danger of denial? Because it is not some discreet hidden disposition, but works itself out in destructive ways. One of the social and political phenomena which I link to the massive power of denial is what can be called the “winner-syndrome”. Public propaganda tells us that you have to be a winner and there is nothing worse than being a “loser”. To be the first is the only thing that counts, to come in second, or third, borders on shame.

The “winners” in the world of sports and entertainment mirror the “winners” in the world of economics and politics, and contempt is heaped on the “losers” in these power games. The psychological and social cost of the “winner-syndrome” is considerable. In order to remain “on top”, the winner has to deny his weak spots, must always appear to be invulnerable, in full control of things. He is expected to “sacrifice” everything for remaining “number One”. On the other hand, the “losers” must conceal from themselves and others the impact of defeat and failure. And they will do that by finding someone in comparison to whom they can feel like “winners”, mostly women, or children, or minorities of strangers or outcasts.

So the “winner-syndrome” is the highly violent exercise of oppression. Besides, it is very much a game we men act out. The violence of male-dominated societies is linked to the winner and loser dualism. It is one of the most pervasive – and perverse – aspects of our contemporary world. The idolatry of “success” feeds into it, so there is no room left for mercy.

The “winner-syndrome” is the cult of mercilessness; for the winner is never guilty and knows nothing to be ashamed of. What does this mean for us as members of Christian churches? In the center of our faith is a “loser”. As we remember this “loser” we are reminded that our place is with all who are lost, victimized, and excluded.

I think that a vital part of our public ministry is to demythologize the idolatry of the “winner” and to witness to the deeper connectedness among all human beings. To affirm the “unity of humankind” is by no means a futile academic notion; it is an essential expression of a connectedness that transcends our social, economic, racial, and cultural stereotypes.

## **7. HEALING THE ANGER – OVERCOMING VIOLENCE**

Lest I appear to be a purist, let me make clear that there will always be denial of various sorts. We turn a blind eye on ourselves time and again. But there are forms of massive denial that call for constant vigilance. Why do I think that Christian communities should consider it part of their common mission to be mindful of denial? Because denial and violence go hand in hand.

I don't think that we need Freud and Jung and Erikson and all their schools to understand that, if we cannot face the woundedness within ourselves, we will tend to discover it in others. Worse, if we are intent on killing the woundedness within us we will tend to wound others and, worse still, kill the other, the stranger, for the sake of our own wounds. There is something so archaic about this scapegoating mechanism that it makes us weary, yet it is as alive today as it ever was. It is no longer organized religion that takes care of the sacred scapegoating rituals. In our secularized societies it is the media which carries on this work. It keeps the scapegoating mechanism going. The leading figures of sports and entertainment, of royal blood or power centers are lifted up to the unearthly height of "stardom" so that they can be brought down to hell. There is no redemption in it, of course, no redeeming significance; it is a relentless mimetic game that stages public rituals of sacrifice and hunting for suitable victims all the time.

What is wrong with a game? Nothing, we might say, as long as everyone involved knows that it is a game. But do we?

I am not sure. My observation is that a large part of the printed and electronic media prefers not to know what they are doing. They like to deny that the violent games they are putting on display create, or contribute to creating, the standards by which people learn what the "action is". There is a subtle reciprocity between the violence played out in public and the hidden violence within us. But instead of using this reciprocity in order to contain the violence, it is being intensified all the time. We are immersed in schools of violence. That is my impression.

I mentioned that the Harare Assembly of the World Council of Churches has agreed to begin the new millennium with a "Decade to Overcome Violence". This decision provides a frame of reference within which our churches can develop specific contributions. But what do we have to contribute?

I said earlier that we are communities constituted by our remembering of the crucified and risen Christ, whom the Book of Revelations calls the Lamb. So at the center of our corporate Christian identity there is the One on whose death the games of scapegoating have ended. "Remember: He is our peace", says the Letter to the Ephesians, "who has made us one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility ... and might reconcile us both (that is the people of the covenant and those outside it) to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God".

This passage shows us the reciprocity of remembering. We are called to remember the One who re-members us by making us members of God's household. He is our peace because he breaks down the walls that separate us; so he puts an end to the processes of dis-memberment and re-members us into a new community as fellow citizens.

Perhaps I am putting too much meaning into this verb "to remember". But I like to see it not simply as an expression of historical consciousness but as a constructive process over against the massive processes of dis-memberment. Remembering is more than reconstructing our awareness of things that are past; it is about reconstituting fellowship through the ages and across the nations.

It is the wounded one who makes us one. It is the cross that kills the enmity. How, then, will this mystery be manifested in our lives?

I think that Christian communities must join their efforts to present alternatives to scapegoating. The repetitive games with stereotypes and enemy images must be outdated for us. We need to drop out of the schools of violence all around us and try to enter what the Graz Assembly of the European Churches last year called the "schools of mercy". If we have a mission of healing it will begin with our commitment to non-violent resistance. The school of "Ahimsa", to use the key word of Gandhi, the strategies of boycotting, to refer to the Civil Rights Movement in the USA, are helpful reminders of the ways Christian communities will have to explore much more, because their traditional impact on public life has largely disappeared. In most of Europe the churches have become minorities left with the options either to disappear in the niches of religious insignificance or to reappear as a movement that stands for an alternative vision.

How, then, can our children and young people learn to connect with others who are portrayed to them as strangers or enemies? How can people, and men in particular, be helped to come to terms with their frustration and rage? An ecumenical programme to overcome violence will need to give special attention to the causes of male violence. And, instead of simply accusing men as mere brutes, how can they be given new roles and images that combine self-respect with care? In large parts of the world men have lost the idea of what it means to be a father. They have dropped out of the fabric of caring and nurturing. It is essential for their dignity and for the well-being of society that they be reintegrated.

## **8. “DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME”**

I have emphasized the constructive meaning of deep remembering. And I have said that the churches' common mission has to do with active and constructive remembering, which means with connecting what has been separated and joining together what has been dismembered. But as we in our churches move towards this common mission we are confronted with the question: And what about the central symbol of your remembering? What about the call of Jesus who in the night he was betrayed took the bread, and the cup and shared them with his disciples, saying: “Eat, drink! And do this in remembrance of me!”

It has always been for me a source of deep comfort to see Jesus sharing his very life with men who betrayed him. They started out as cowards, but as they began to realize the power of the wounded one they were radically transformed. Therefore, since Jesus accepts his disciples with unconditional love, we too should receive each other at the Lord's Table with unconditional humility and respect. Since Christ has broken down the walls between us we are not allowed to erect new ones around the precious Table of our Lord. Since Christ is the end of our enmity the eucharist must be the celebration of our uniting and the joyful feast of friends. So the eucharist is the celebration of our connectedness in the midst of, and in spite of, persisting confusion and brokenness.

Those who are opposed to celebrating the eucharist together argue that the existing doctrinal differences must be overcome before we can share in the Lord's Table. In the terms of this talk this means: first we must be healed and then we will celebrate it. The mystery of our faith is, however, that we can never hope to be more than wounded

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healers. And we should never want to be anything other, for this is the way to stay close to the Cross.

And, as I said before, the closer we get to the Cross, the closer we get to each other.