

“Become what you have eaten”
Lord’s Supper
Lk.5:27-32, 22:14-20, 24:28-35
(24:28 ‘as the two disciples... Jesus walked’)
TUMC, Oct.5/14 – final
By John Rempel

Long ago I made a visit to the Soviet Union. I was in Moscow on a Sunday and went to church at one of only two Baptist congregations in the city that were legally permitted to gather. The church was already packed when I arrived, with only a few seats left in the balcony. The intensity of the singing and praying moved me deeply even though it was in a language I did not understand.

It was a Communion Sunday. From the balcony I could see everything that was happening. After the communion prayer and the words of institution the black suited ministers and deacons took the bread into the rows. It was their custom for people to come to the end of the bench to receive the elements. As if against their better judgement, people arose before a server neared them, some with trembling hands. A few communicants actually wedged themselves between others and stuck their hand forward to be sure to get their hands on the bread. In their hunger of body and soul they knew this was no ordinary bread. In it salvation had come within reach.

The Lord’s Supper is the most profound dramatization of the Gospel. It takes the narrative of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection and enacts it in a single gesture, the breaking of bread, the sharing of wine. The story these elements tell begins with the promise of liberation from

captivity for the Israelites. This promise begins its fulfillment when Jesus is born. Theologically we would say it begins when the Word becomes flesh, when God enters our life on our terms. Where Jesus teaches, blesses, heals, dies, rises - there God is teaching, blessing, healing, dying, rising.

Meals have an astonishingly important, and often overlooked, role in Jesus' ministry of making God tangible: Jesus face is the face of God speaking words of welcome, Jesus hands are the hands of God embracing those who come near. Let's look at three of Jesus' meal encounters. The opening words of our passage from Luke 5 take our breath away. Jesus meets a man named Levi. He is a tax collector - a Jew who extracts payment from his fellow believers on behalf of their Roman oppressors. There must have been a long conversation between Jesus and Levi, or even several, before Levi's life changing decision. But at just the right moment Jesus blurts out, "Follow me!" And Levi follows, leaving all his treasures behind.

Before us stands a man set free from his false self to become the person God intended him to be. In an outpouring of gratitude Levi gives a great banquet for Jesus. He invites people like himself, who loved mammon more than God. It is in the breaking of bread, in the vulnerability of a shared meal, that Jesus gives himself to them. And the dinner guests, like Levi, are drawn to Jesus because they sense he offers them something that money can't buy. The Pharisees, on the other hand, the keepers of the law, can't imagine unholy people being welcomed to a holy meal. "Why?" they cry out. Jesus responds, "Those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick".

Encounters like this one only intensify Jesus' passion to be the face of God to people who can't see God, to be the hands of God to those who have concluded that there is no one to embrace them. The more Jesus stands in for God the more those in authority, political and religious, see him as a competitor for people's loyalty. They resent this other king, this usurper, who is turning the world up side down. They cannot tolerate this One who heals without price, who sets no limit but love. Ominously, the religious and political figures make common cause against him. Not only that, but one of Jesus' own company is waiting to betray him.

This is the backdrop for our second passage from Luke. Knowing that his life is on the line, that everything is at stake, Jesus turns to the ritual of God's faithfulness in rescuing Israel from Egypt and later from Babylon, the Passover meal. This time only those who have declared their loyalty to Jesus are invited. In the most audacious act of his ministry, Jesus takes these symbol laden loaves and cups of the Passover drama and makes them signs of a new rescue, a new faithfulness that God will bring about through him. Following custom, Jesus takes a loaf, which symbolized the Passover lamb, gives thanks, and offers it to his friends. But then he makes a breathtaking departure from custom, claiming, "This is my body." And likewise, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood". Nothing bolder could be said. Jesus is now the lamb that bears the people's sin and breaks its power.

Overwhelmed by his own words and their shocking implications, Jesus takes his inner circle of companions to the Mount of Olives to pray

that the cup he has just poured out for his disciples might still be removed. Then he breaks through to an act of surrender. "Yet not my will but yours be done." It is our awe at Jesus' boundless self-giving that gives the Communion service its solemnity. That's why it is so important to rightly understand what is happening. It is not the suffering of Jesus as such that saves us but the relentlessness of his love that did not shrink from suffering. In the end, it is not only the Romans and the Jews but all the powers of the world who accuse him of being a usurper of the kings of the earth, and then crucify him. In bearing this onslaught of evil to the cross he breaks its power and sets the world and all humanity free.

With this claim, the story of the Gospel has reached its climax but not yet its conclusion. To put it into sacramental terms, the Last Supper has not yet become the Lord's Supper. To hear the conclusion of the story, we must turn to our third passage from Luke. It is taken from the longer account of Jesus' resurrection. On the evening of Easter day, after the women have found the empty tomb and the dumbfounded disciples have seen a dead man walking, Jesus joins two of his downcast followers on the road. So sorrowful are they at the death of the one they believed would redeem Israel that they cannot recognize him. Nevertheless there is something that draws them to Jesus. Evening falls as they arrive at Emmaus, their home village. They invite the stranger to be their guest. He accepts.

In their culture there was no sharing of a home without sharing a meal. No sooner have the hosts bidden their guest to partake than there is a reversal of roles: suddenly Jesus is the host and they are the guests!

He takes bread, blesses, breaks, and gives it to his incredulous friends. In this signature gesture of Jesus' ministry they recognize him. In offering them bread he gives them himself; they take the bread and with it comes the Giver. No simpler description of the mystery of Communion can be found than this.

Finally the great tale of the Gospel has been told. The story is finished. Or is it? The story isn't complete until we answer a question. What are we going to do with this bread of life that we have been offered? Our first impulse is to hoard it because there might not be enough to go around. But, in fact, something has happened to us that makes hoarding impossible: we have become the body of Christ; we are bearers of the bread that can still the hungers of the world. An incident from the ministry of the great 4th century theologian Augustine makes this transformation clear. After the congregation had taken Communion Augustine was momentarily without words, as if something more needed to be said. Suddenly he cried out to the congregation, "Become what you have eaten!" In other words, you have not only received the body of Christ, you have become that body. Your broken limbs have been re-made into a whole body. Now it's your turn – our turn - to live out the incarnation – to become the hands and feet, the consoling voice, the healing touch of Christ in the world. In a few moments we will gather around the Lord's Table as beggars telling one another where bread can be found. Then we will be called to turn away from this Table to the tables of the world where our fellow beggars wait for the bread that brings eternal life. Amen.