

"Can God spread a table in the wilderness?"

**Lord's Supper
Psalm 78:15-25
John 6:23-35
TUMC
October 4, 2015**

Spirit of God, beyond my words let your Word be heard. Amen.

Everybody gets hungry. Hungry for that which stills the longings of body and soul. Today's psalm recounts Israel's worries as it made its 40 year trek across the desert. In that barren land the people had no food security. God had promised that he would provide for them. Yet in this waterless and foodless wasteland Moses' and Miriam's people despaired of surviving. First they demanded water so God split a rock from which water gushed. But the craving for nourishment remained and the people taunted God to perform another miracle, shouting out to the sky, "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?". God was angry that Israel did not trust his promise. "Yet", the story continues, God opened the doors of heaven and rained down manna.

Throughout the Bible 'bread' has layers of meaning. First of all bread is baked grain that strengthens the body. Physical food should not be disdained. The hundreds of thousands of refugees in the Middle East and parts of Africa are a day closer to dying for every day without bread. But even at this literal level part of the nourishment comes from knowing that someone baked it and offered it. The ultimate giver, behind all the others, is God. The Toronto Star recently featured vignettes of individual refugees who took heart as much by the goodness of the giver as the goodness of the gift: bread is a symbol for that which nourishes our spirits as well as our bodies. Bread is a sign of divine goodness and human community.

Jesus admonishes the people who come in search of him in John 6 that they have reduced bread to its physicality. They have been so eager to

consume it that they have missed the fact that with the food, Jesus has given them himself. Let's look more closely at John's account.

People who shared a meal with Jesus on a previous day have come together again because they hear that he is in the neighborhood. They go after Jesus and shamelessly pester him for more. Jesus is frustrated. The crowd seems to think that all you need to be fulfilled is more bread, more fishes. They don't recognize that our hungers aren't all stilled once we have had our fill of bodily bread. Jesus chides the crowd. "You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." They have missed the sign character of the meal – pointing beyond itself to God's provision for this life and the life to come. They are consumers who are satisfied with bread that perishes and miss the invitation to eat bread that leads to eternal life.

The second half of John 6, where our reading begins, takes the sign character of a loaf of bread to another level. Malcolm Muggeridge was a British literary critic who had a middle aged conversion to Christ. He was grappling for words to describe what had happened to him in his autobiography. Finally he concluded, "Because of physical hunger we know there must be bread; because of spiritual hunger we know there must be Christ". In other words, the lack of something we crave tells us that there must be a way of stilling that craving. Coming to faith, at its most basic, is this awareness that there is someone who can still our hunger.

In our passage Jesus calls himself the "Bread of God" and the "Bread of Life". God is the one who nourishes, who gives life; we taste him in the flesh and blood, the very person, of Jesus. The sign he offers us of his self-giving is the meal we call the Lord's Supper. This meal offers us heavenly nourishment through earthly food. We take bread and wine, and realize to our amazement, that we have gotten our hands on Jesus; all of a sudden salvation is within reach.

How can this be, we ask with the crowd? How can we get our hands on somebody we can't even see? I discovered how this happens when I was among people who longed for Christ shamelessly, the way a deer longs for flowing waters. One Sunday long ago during the Soviet regime I went to worship in one of the only two Baptist churches in Moscow. It was a Communion Sunday. I was sitting in the balcony, looking down on an overflowing congregation, not missing a move. After the prayers of thanks, the bread and wine were taken through the rows by ministers as the people sang their hearts out. As if against their better judgment, there were people who arose even before a server neared them, their hands trembling. One of the communicants, an old lady, even wedged herself between others to be sure she got their hands on the bread of life. It was the pledge that assured her she was participating in salvation that very moment. She knew she was touching and handling things unseen. No amount of persecution could take that sustaining reality from her.

Out of reverence for the mystery of Jesus' meal, people have tried to explain what it is and what it is not. This is helpful if it keeps us from extreme explanations. At one end are those who fear that people will scoff at the claim that Jesus encounters us when bread is broken in his name. To 'prove' their point they insist that the substance of the bread becomes the body of Christ. At the other extreme are those who fear that people will try to contain Jesus in the bread, making Communion an object rather than a relationship. So they insist that the breaking of bread is 'merely' an outward sign.

After Jesus makes the link between 'body' and 'bread' they cannot be separated. Yet we can't help but ask, "What is the relationship between them?" Some people say the bread becomes flesh. Others say that the bread is simply a metaphor for a mystical encounter with Christ. Perhaps one could say, that as I eat the bread I receive the body, the very person of Christ. I take the gift of bread and with it comes the Giver.

In Article 12 our Confession of Faith says the following. "In sharing the bread and cup each believer remembers the death of Jesus and God's act of deliverance in raising Jesus from the dead. ... The Supper re-presents the presence of the risen Christ in the church. As we partake of the communion of the bread and the cup, the gathered body of believers shares in the body and blood of Christ." In words chosen with great care the confession sets out an alternative to the above extremes that, in my view, faithfully interprets the NT.

How does the sacred meal Jesus gave us unfold? *Step One*, in our personal preparation before we gather and at the beginning of our gathering we examine ourselves. We do so not to become perfect, but to ask ourselves and one another where our lives are open to God's Spirit and to one another and where they are not. Where our lives are open, we rejoice; where they are closed we ask for forgiveness and newness of life. It's crucial to realize that Christ is present not only to the extent that we are faithful. God's grace is not limited to our faith. Happily, we cannot confine the Spirit – she does more than we can imagine. But we grieve the Spirit if we come to the Table unforgiving and unforgiven.

Step Two, we proclaim God's reconciling work through Scripture, sermon, and song. This proclamation is to make clear that the fellowship we have with Christ and one another is not something we make happen, first of all, but something we receive. We point beyond ourselves and ground ourselves in God's offer of a covenant with us. Baptism is the sign we give to those who do this for the first time. In baptism we enter that covenant and in Communion we renew it.

Three, in the communion prayers we remember with heartfelt gratitude Jesus living, dying, and being raised from the dead as our reconciliation with God. Then we pray that the Holy Spirit might make this same Jesus present in us and among us as we share his holy meal. Paul writes to the Corinthians about this reality, "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation

in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break is it not a participation in the body of Christ?" (I Cor 10:16)

Step Four, we speak the words of institution, the same words Jesus spoke to his disciples during the Last Supper. They tie us to the original event; they make clear that the promise of Jesus is the warrant for what we are doing; they are the words we have in common with every Christian community around the world that breaks bread in Jesus' name. This is exactly what we celebrate on World Communion Sunday.

Step Five, we offer one another bread and wine. In that sharing the mystery happens and God makes us one with Christ and his people.

Finally, Step Six, we take the Bread of Life we have received back into the world and share it with all who hunger.

P A U S E

Our forbears of old on their trek through the desert tested God with an audacious question, "Can God spread a table in the wilderness?" The psalmist recounts, God "opened the doors of heaven and rained down on them manna to eat".

He does so again today, this very moment. Amen.