

By Your Spirit Make Us One

A sermon taken from John 17, and preached on June 5, 2011 at Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina by Dr. Ken Carter.

A meal is at the center of God's relationship with us. Israel tells its story at the Passover meal, how they were liberated from slavery and led into the Promised Land (Exodus 12). Jesus shares this same Passover meal with his own disciples (John 13), and commands them to eat this meal in remembrance of him (Matthew 26). Jesus feeds the multitudes (John 6), eats meals with sinners (Luke 15), and shares a mysterious meal with two of the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24).

The first Christians break bread together and eat their meals with glad and generous hearts (Acts 2). But later, there are communal abuses of the practice of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11). One of the most misunderstood concepts in Christian faith and practice, the reference to eating the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner referred to the experiences of gluttony and poverty at the common meal: some had too much to eat, others went away hungry. The Christian hope was also shaped by the expectation of a Messiah who would preside over a great banquet (Luke 14).

And so this meal is at the heart of the Christian experience and the community gathers at the table to be fed, and, in the process, to know that we are guests of a generous and providential God.

Meals are also at the center of our relationships with each other. Family meals can take on different connotations: wedding rehearsal dinners, meals to celebrate graduations or birthdays, families who sat down to lunch after a memorial service, and journeys to distant places where we enjoy the local cuisine---it could be a falafel in Israel or barbecue in eastern North Carolina.

As a Christian practice, receiving Holy Communion can also take on different meanings. On World Communion Sunday, we are conscious that we receive this grace with our brothers and sisters in Christ who worship throughout the earth, the one body who partake of the one loaf, and our sense of space is enlarged. On All Saints Sunday, we remember those men and women of faith who have gone before us. Our sense of time is enlarged in the Communion of Saints. These two days give us a glimpse of the richness of the feast. There are always more people on the guest list, more people coming to the table than we might have imagined!

The grace of God is expansive, broad and comprehensive. Charles Wesley's hymn text conveys this truth: *"O that the world might taste and see the riches of his grace! The arms of love that compass me would all the world embrace."*

And yet our practice is always at a particular moment in time, in a specific place in the world, in the body of Christ, with a loaf of bread and a cup. The arms of God's

love embrace the whole world, and yet each person is welcomed in the spirit of Charles Wesley's invitation: *Come sinners to the gospel feast!* And that includes every one of us!

Holy Communion is a reminder that **God provides grace for us**. Jesus teaches us to pray, **give us this day our daily bread**.

The word *daily bread* is one that has multiple meanings. It can mean fresh bread, and those listening to Jesus would have been reminded of the gift of bread in the wilderness, manna that was new every morning, and we remember that every time we sing another hymn,

*Great is thy faithfulness, great is thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed thy hand has provided.
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.*

That hymn, pointing back to Jesus' teaching in John 6, that he is the bread of life, which itself had origins in the Passover, is a reminder that God provides grace for us. "Great is thy faithfulness"... "Give us each day fresh bread", which means, I think, that we are praying for sufficient provisions for each day. None of us can truly secure the future, we cannot build a fortress to keep violent threats away, insulate ourselves from economic shifts, or predict the status of our health next year. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we live one day at a time.

And so we pray, give us this day "*fresh bread*", a new experience of the truth that God provides grace for us. Great is thy faithfulness. The meal is also a reminder that God's grace is available to all. John 6 is the account of the feeding of the 5000, which all began with a boy who had five loaves and two fish. And the simple truth was that God's grace was not just for a few, not just for the disciples in the boat, but for all: "*the arms of love that compass me would all the world embrace!*"

Jesus made this point again and again in his teaching, and he modeled this truth—that God's grace is available to all—in his life. "*He eats with sinners*", some murmur under their breath in Luke 15, and so Jesus tells three of his great parables, about a lost coin, a lost sheep, a lost son. The son of man has come to seek and save that which is lost (Luke 19. 10).

In John Wesley's day some felt they were unworthy to receive communion, and his response was that we are all unworthy to receive any mercy from God, and yet that is the core of the gospel: *While we were yet sinners Christ died for us* (Romans 5. 8), while we were far off a banquet was being prepared for us. As members of Providence we have claimed the phrase of Bishop Schnase: "radical hospitality", which reminds us of the invitation, *Come sinners to the gospel feast!* God's grace is available to all.

The meal is also a reminder that the **grace given to us now is a foretaste of the banquet which is to come**. One of the most reliable interpretations of the teaching of Jesus, "*give us this day our daily bread*", is that he is praying, give us this day our bread for tomorrow. This was an anticipation of the great banquet, where disciples would be gathered from the north and the south and the east and the west to sit at the table of the Lord. This is the great homecoming. Homecomings are not about the past, although we do remember. Homecomings are also about the future.

A few years ago I went back to a rural church to preach at a homecoming service. I remembered a couple who had taken Pam and me under their wing, and made that community our community. We shared many meals together at the seafood restaurant in that rural area, eating bread and fish. These were often times of communion, confession, and thanksgiving. They have since passed to the other side, and I look forward to a homecoming with them, to the banquet, the great supper of the Lord.

Again, I think of a moving hymn by Charles Wesley:

*Come let us join our friends above who have obtained the prize
and on the eagle wings of love to joys celestial rise.*

Many of our friends have passed to the other side and have obtained the prize. And so we pray with Jesus: *Give us bread for tomorrow*.

Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again. The Christian practice of Holy Communion celebrates the providence of God, the hospitality of Jesus Christ, and the foretaste of his kingdom. As we come to the table, we know that God provides for us; that the grace of Jesus Christ is offered to all people, and that the meal we share here is an anticipation of the banquet that has been prepared for all who will accept the invitation:

*Come sinners to the gospel feast, let every soul be Jesus' guest
You need not one be left behind, for God hath bid all humankind.*

Of course, we have not always welcomed everyone. In the history of American Methodist Christianity we recall the exclusion of Richard Allen and Absalom Jones from the fellowship of St. George's Church in Philadelphia. Allen, a freed slave and an active Methodist, would go on to found the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816 and serve as its first Bishop. This experience indicates a lack of hospitality that has led to a continued division. The Table of the Lord is a sign of God's grace but it also stands in judgment upon our failure to offer radical hospitality, and our willingness to settle for divided lives.

And so Holy Communion requires us to struggle with the implications of our union with each another, and our divisions. We pray, each time we share this meal, that the Spirit would make us "*one with Christ, one with each other*,

and one in ministry to all the world."

To be one with Christ is to be lifted up, with him. And so we "lift up our hearts". Holy Communion draws us closer to God, through the mediating presence of Jesus Christ. But Holy Communion also draws us closer to one another. I have asked, since the first service we shared together, that after receiving we join hands: There are vertical and horizontal dimensions of this meal. It reminds us of the One from whom all blessings flow, and the ones with whom we share these blessings. And so the meal is God's way of breaking down the barriers and divisions that separate us from Him and from each other, and the means of fulfilling the prayer of Jesus in the gospel lesson for today, that we might be one.

And yet, like the loaves and fish in the basket, the meal nourishes those beyond us: *Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.* It is an echo of a very elemental prayer I have heard many of you say as you have led in prayer: *bless this food to our bodies and us in thy service.*

By your spirit make us one... In a polarized and fragmented world, the church of Jesus Christ can be a sign of God's unity, peace and wholeness. And so we come this morning divided in many ways: by our income levels and personal experiences, by our aesthetic tastes and political convictions, by gender and ethnicity and age, estranged within families and across neighborhoods.

We come this morning divided perhaps by harm we have done to others and by the awareness of those who have sinned against us. The good news of Jesus Christ is that we are his body, indeed that we are one body. Holy Communion brings us closer to God and to one another. The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

Now in Jesus Christ you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups (Jew or Gentile, but in our own time name any two groups that come to mind) he has made both groups into one and broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us. That he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross. (Ephesians 2)

Let us pray: You are a God of miracles. You transform ordinary bread into the body of Jesus Christ, everyday wine into his very life poured out for us. We ask for yet another miracle: Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world... Until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at his heavenly banquet. Amen.

Source: The United Methodist *Hymnal*