

## **Amazing Heavenly Bread**

These past three Sundays we have looked at Jesus' teaching in John 6, where he refers to himself as the Bread of Life. In so doing we have tried to unravel the relevance of this to our own lives.

At the beginning we read about the amazing feeding of the five thousand with five loaves and a couple of fish — basic nutrition provided by mass production. Having received this gift, the crowd pursues Jesus around to the other side of the lake (he himself having walked across it) looking for more. Like their Israelite ancestors, who received a daily portion of manna in the desert, the crowd is clamoring to be fed on a similar scale with “bread from heaven” — the kind of plain old daily bread one might expect from a cosmic convenience store.

But Jesus isn't interested in making bread for subsistence; he is in the business of providing bread for eternal life — the “true bread from heaven ... that which ... gives life to the world” (vv. 32-33). The “true bread” that Jesus offers is the kind that brings people into a deep relationship with God. Breaking bread with someone was a sign of true intimacy in the ancient world — a sign that those who participated in the meal were bonded for life.

In a shocking reinterpretation of this tradition, Jesus offers himself to the world as “bread” — the means through which God and humanity become bonded for eternal and abundant life. “Just as the living God sent me and I live because of God, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me ... he who feeds on me will live forever” (v. 57-58). “Feeding” on Jesus is a means of taking in all that he offers — the satisfying fullness of salvation, the daily nutrients of the indwelling Holy Spirit and the strength to live life to the full with an eternal perspective.

Jesus is the bread — a concept too weird for many people. The disciples' response to Jesus' offer is that it's a “hard teaching” (v. 60), and John tells us that, “From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him” (v. 66).

Maybe it's because they couldn't get past the seemingly cannibalistic language that Jesus was using. Maybe it's because they simply couldn't accept the gift that Jesus was offering them — there was no way they could “earn” it, no list of righteous boxes to check, no requirements to clean your hands and use proper table manners.

At a recent visit to a local funeral home, one of the directors shared with me his impassioned views about the loss of ritual in our society. I realize that part of this has to do with diminishing religious values but, in this particular case it also has to do with the economy. I was reminded of that conversation when I reflecting on this gift of Jesus – he was willing to dispense with the protocol and ritual that people might be reached with this free deal with God.

Whatever our theology about the Bread of Life, each Sunday we join and millions of other Christians in ritualizing that same gift of Christ as the share of bread and fruit of the vine. Depending on the theology this symbolic feast has been called the Mass, the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion. It seems to be the one thing unites us also divides us because

we have put the ritual before the free gift, and unlike Jesus, we have been allowed to determine who may participate.

When we receive the bread offered during Holy Communion, it's the spiritual equivalent of receiving free bread. Regardless of our denominational tradition, the "real" bread and "real" drink connect us deeply and spiritually with God through Christ. We are nourished by the grace we receive, knowing that we have been welcomed to the table by Christ; encouraged by the diverse crowd around us and strengthened to live life to the full.

However, because we have ritualized this spiritual feast, we once again given prominence to the physical bread/wafer and wine/juice; while Christ calls us to look beyond these physical symbols to spiritual significance.

In Metropolitan Community Church we celebrate Holy Communion every week. We do so because we value the freedom to respond to Christ's gift and share a responsibility to make it available to those who have been told they're excluded, that they might know that in this place they are included.

Our invitation is not based on membership rites or evident faith, but the fact that Jesus extended his invitation to "whosoever". We are not here to judge one another's faith but to empower each other to live it. We recognize the diversity of faith and realize that we live out our faith in different ways.

Those of you who know each other well, will understand our diversity of backgrounds, some are Catholic, some are Baptist, some are Mennonite, some are Pentecostal, some are traditional, some are progressive or liberal. Our diversity impacts the way we interpret the act of communion. I'm sure if I went around the room we'd probably come up with a dozen different reasons for why we take or don't take communion, but if we can't get beyond the ritual and its history in our different traditions; then we'll always fall short of experiencing the freedom that this holy meal offers. When Jesus shared the meal with his disciples, it was a uniting of their interests and passions.

Why do we do what we do? Even MCC has tradition. However our traditions have been developed out of respect for one another. Intincting was introduced during the AIDS years, because people living with AIDS virus felt compromised by sharing a common cup. MCC had already adopted non alcoholic wine or juice, because of the large number of people in recovery in our congregations. In creating our rituals, our goal is to look for ways that unite people, not ways that cause people to stay away.

When the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts, they assumed that the best food to eat was the food they had always eaten. They had grown up with wheat, so they felt strongly that wheat was what a good Christian family was supposed to eat.

But wheat-eaters starve in New England — the soil simply won't support it. So the Puritans had to focus on corn, and they found that this new food enabled them to survive and even thrive.

So, while in our tradition we seek to emulate the meal that Christ shared with his disciples – unleavened bread and fruit of the vine – it is not the physical food that is important but the sharing together. We are united with Christ and the disciples not because we're eating similar bread but because we share the same hope and accept the gift of life in Christ. Christ was the portal to a new relationship with God, in the sharing in the communion we affirm that we have passed through that portal – just as we are – no special privilege just us – not based on what we might become but on who we are.

It's easy to live in a dream of what we might become, but God is interested in who we are, that our relationship might better influence who we may become.

When you come forward for communion this evening, which I hope you will, may it reaffirm the good theology – the theology of God's love and forgiveness – that as we receive it so may we be motivated to act toward others.

May this communion also affirm that you are not alone – regardless of where you are in your journey, your standing with these people is just a representation of being at one with many, many people the world over, people who have gone before and opened the way to us and people who will come in the future because of us.