

LAUGHING AT THE TABLE

World Communion Sunday 2011

Matthew 26:26-29; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

This morning we celebrate.

In a few moments we sit down at a banquet.

It will rival the fanciest banquet you've been to all year.

It's not going to *look* like much.

No actual table, no fresh linens, no polished silver.

It's not going to *taste* like much.

A pinch of bread, a sip of juice.

That's *all*.

Oh, but there *will* be live music.

And this will be a banquet of the highest order.

I assure you.

There will be high, holy feasting.

It will be . . . or at least *should* be . . . entered into

with a heart full of joy,

with an attitude of sheer delight.

And there should be laughing at the table.

If not *out loud*, at least with a laughing *spirit*.

(The table will be figurative. I suppose the laughing can be *too*.)

There was an era, before *my* day, at least in *some* families,

when laughing at the dinner table was frowned upon.

Not *here*.

Let me tell you why.

When Jesus took a loaf of bread, with his disciples all around the table,
and broke it, and blessed it,

he said to them, "Take, eat, this is my body."

Obviously, this was a poignant moment.

No laughter *there*.

The air was thick with tension,

with anxiety about the future,

with, perhaps, the terrible anticipation of grief.

Clearly, there was dead silence when Jesus spoke those words.

But, for *those* disciples at *that* moment,

even though they did not know everything it meant,

even though it would be years before they grasped

that there was any joy at that table,

eating that bread *was*, in fact, an act of embracing life—

full and meaningful and joyful life.

That bread nourished them *completely*.

In body and in spirit.

They were eating life.

They were eating joy.

Eating that bread deepened their relationship with Jesus.

They had spent the last two or three years following Jesus around,

mostly as observers,

sometimes as clumsy and confused participants.

They had eaten at table with Jesus *many* times,

but tonight was different.

When Jesus handed them the broken bread,

he invited them into a new intimacy with him,

deeper than anything they knew to that point.

Through these powerful symbols of bread and cup,

Jesus was saying to them, "Eat me. Drink me.

Take me into your own body.

Let me become fully a part of you.

Let *my* life become *your* life.

Stand no more at a distance.

Come close, take me into yourself.

Let *my* work become *your* work.

My passion *your* passion.

My joy *your* joy.

My suffering *your* suffering.

My broken body . . . *your* body."

Yes, that moment was full of pathos,

and there was a sense of foreboding that hung heavy in the air.

But *underneath* all that,

this was a moment rich in joyful meaning.

Looking back, the disciples would never *know* a deeper joy,

than they experienced that night,
because Jesus was welcoming them
to a new and deeper level of intimacy.
They had never been loved *more*,
than they were that night breaking bread.

It's curious to me, that in the church today
when we partake of communion,
we remember mostly the pathos and foreboding,
and less frequently enter fully into
the deep joy and pleasure of partaking of this bread.

It's *curious*.
But at least occasionally we try to recover
some of the sheer pleasure of celebrating salvation at the table.
As we will today.

The bread we will eat here today is nothing to write home about.
Just ordinary bread.
Oh, it will be good. Soft. Homemade.
But not enough to satisfy a hungry stomach.
The juice today will only tease our tastebuds.
It will be sweet. Flavorful.
But it will barely wash down the pinch of bread.

We won't expect much from the food and drink itself.
But if we allow ourselves to enter this experience,
to be alert and aware of its fullest meaning,
it will be as great a pleasure
as sitting down with a whole loaf, a whole wineglass,
and platters full of every delicacy.
Because we will be eating and drinking at Jesus' own invitation.
He says to us, still, today,
Stand no more at a distance.
Come close, take me into yourself.
I love you, and you are mine.

There is another reason to eat heartily and joyfully
at the communion table.

The bread not only represents the sacrifice of Jesus,
and his invitation to a kind of spiritual intimacy.

It also represents the body of Christ *today*—
the fellowship of believers,
and the invitation we extend to each other,
to be part of each other.

The apostle Paul saw this meaning in the bread.
He wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:

The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?
Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body,
for we all partake of the one bread.

And Menno Simons, for whom we Mennonites are named,
wrote these words over 450 years ago:
“For as a loaf being composed of many grains
is but one bread;
so we also being composed of many members
are but one body in Christ.”

That's what our epistle reading was about this morning, in 1 Cor. 12.
Paul wrote again about the body, saying,
God has arranged this body, with its many and various parts,
in such a way that “there may be no dissension within the body,
but the members may have the same care for one another.
If one member suffers, *all* suffer together with it;
if one member is honored, *all* rejoice together with it.”

There is beauty and joy in the partaking of communion.
Because by so doing
we celebrate the nourishment
we receive in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus,
and . . .
we celebrate the nourishment of the gathered body of Christ,
made up of its many and various grains,
all coming together into one loaf of bread.

What a rich symbol of the body!

These grains get mixed together, worked over,
left to rest, worked over some *more*,
shaped by loving hands,
and baked into that one beautiful, nourishing, loaf.
It's the staff of life.
We *need* the life of the *body* of Christ,
as much as we need the life of Christ.
We can't live without them, either one.

Yet, obviously, it nourishes us *only* as much as we are receptive to it.
Bread sitting in a basket won't do anything for us.
We must take and eat.
We must let it become part of us in every way.

It relates to what I was saying a couple weeks ago,
when I spoke about the essential Christian virtue of hospitality,
living life with wide open arms.
There are priceless gifts to be received,
valuable treasures to enjoy,
as we open ourselves to the body,
to the church of Jesus Christ,
to this spiritual and social reality symbolized in the bread.
If we assume a self-protective stance,
the gifts will never be opened and enjoyed.

It must be received, ingested, infused,
in order for it to nourish us.
Freshly baked bread set out on the cutting board,
might be a feast for the eyes,
and its smell *might* lift us heavenward.
But it won't nourish us until we take and eat.

That is true for the kind of bread we know well,
like this body of Christ here at Park View,
this familiar variety of American Mennonite bread,
with an aroma we recognize,
a taste and texture we know very well.
We need to receive it, to be fed by this bread.

It's also true for strange breads,
the bread of our far away brothers and sisters,
injera, ugali, chapati, naan, tortilla, arepa, baguette, or crumpet.
There are parts of the body of Christ
far removed from us in this world.
We also need nourishment from *them*.
In the most profound sense, we are one body, one bread.

And we must open ourselves to be nourished
by the *whole* body of Christ, in all its wonderful variations.
And on this one Sunday of the year, World Communion Sunday,
we celebrate that in a particular way,
because on *this* day,
believers all over the world are taking communion.
This day is recognized by Christians in every time zone of the world.
So already, many of our brothers and sisters in Asia, Australia,
Europe, and Africa,
have taken communion as they gathered to worship this morning,
under trees, under thatched roofs or wooden shingles
or cathedral ceilings.

World Communion Sunday *celebrates* this spiritual union.
It's a union that happens as we receive, as we take into ourselves,
the living Christ,
and the living *body* of Christ in all its many expressions.
And we become one.
Part of each other.
I think it's safe to say we are *where* God wants us to *be* when
it's not clear where I end, and where Christ begins,
or where I end, and the body of Christ begins.

In a world that now, as we *speak*,
is being torn apart by war, terrorism, tribal violence,
religious hatred, acts of vengeance,
we need this Sunday like never before.
We need these ties,
between us in Christian communions around the world,
ties that are stronger than national boundaries.
And we need to make them even stronger.

It's for our spiritual health.
It's for our nourishment.
So this morning, let us take and eat.

As the choir comes up for the anthem,
please turn in your bulletin
to the unison reading, "Affirming our Faith."

I believe in God, the giver of grain and bread,
and in Jesus Christ, the bread of life broken for us,
and in the Holy Spirit,
God's nourishing power in every grain and loaf.
I believe that Christ is to be leaven in us,
so that we may offer the bread of life
to the hungers of every human heart.

—*Phil Kniss, October 2, 2011*