

"The Bread of Life for All"
John 6:24-35

Today is World Communion Sunday and the beginning of our fall focus on stewardship. As we talk about bread and money, I would like to begin with asking some basic questions. Why do we have communion and why do we talk about money in church? Let's start with the easier question: Why do we have communion? What is communion? Are there other names for communion? (Lord's Supper, Eucharist) What is a sacrament? How many sacraments do we have in the Presbyterian Church? Who is invited to the table? What kind of bread are we supposed to use for communion? Can we use something else? Why do we use juice instead of wine? Who is supposed to reside/serve at the table in our tradition? Can we just serve communion whenever we want? (session permission) Why the first Sunday of every other month? I have a communion token here that comes from the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. In the 1800's through World War I, the Presbyterians in Scotland issued communion tokens to their church members. You had to bring your token with you in order to receive communion. The minister or elders met with the people before hand to make sure that they were ready spiritually and were up on their financial giving. While we don't have communion tokens anymore, we still have many rules and regulations about communion. As Christians we often miss the radical reason behind communion. We get focused on how it is done instead of why it is given to us. Christians have spent centuries debating the theological importance of the elements. This is where we get into using big words such Transubstitution where some Christians believe that the bread and the wine are literally changed into the body of Christ. Just like everything else in life, even at communion, we can really miss the point and settle for the little stuff and forget about the big picture of God's radical grace. Till this day many Christian churches don't welcome people of different traditions to communion with them. What I find interesting is that this is similar to tables in our daily lives. Decisions on who gets to sit at the table, in what places, and according to what table manners are reflective of the order of a community in the church, but also in the wider social order. So are choices about who cooks, who serves, who cleans up, who breaks the bread, who initiates and steers the conversation. Our table fellowships can give us a reliable map of economic well-being and discrimination, political order, and social hierarchy. Food is a social substance and currency. What one is able (and chooses) to serve expresses one's own position and helps define one's relationship to others. What you, the guest, are offered is a measure of your standing in the eyes of society and your host.

So, one of the basics to remember about this table is that it really is not our table. It is the table of Jesus Christ. We are reminded of that in our Bible reading for today from John 6. After the feeding of the 5000, Jesus is being asked about giving the people a sign to help them believe him. They just had the sign of the feeding of the 5000 but didn't fully get it. What Jesus gives them is an offer for a relationship. They were looking for someone to tell them how to live. What he offers instead is with whom to live. The image of the sent one and of God as the sender is dominant in John. It comes from the world of communication in the ancient world, where, without the advantages we have of electronic telecommunication and fast transport, people were totally dependent on communicating their own messages personally or sending someone as an envoy who could act on their behalf. They often carried some written communication together with a letter of introduction or commendation from the sender. John makes extensive use of the image of Jesus as God's envoy and spokesperson in the world. What Jesus brings is not primarily an array of information so much as the offer of a relationship of love and acceptance. This relationship is the source of life, eternal life. The bread they were looking for was more of a material nature. Instead Jesus offered them both bread for the body and bread for relationships that nourishes not only the body but also the soul.

Bread is among the most popular foods in the world. Whether it is leavened or unleavened, made into loaves or cakes, baked, steamed, or fried in oil, bread is universal. For centuries bread has been a formidable political and economic weapon. From ancient Rome onward, those in power have always kept a watchful eye on its availability. Roman bakers, for example, were closely regulated and under the control of the state. The Roman state went so far as to nationalize the baking industry.

Knowing the importance of bread and its symbolism, we can better appreciate the image of Jesus as the bread of life for the world. With World Communion, we not only celebrate that we are invited to the table but all are invited, not only the people who are in this country but also all the people of the world. The table of Christ is truly global. The table is a symbol of our unity with all people. We are not just followers of Christ here in Batavia, but also in the whole world. We are not only invited to see that the table is set for us in this country but is also set in every country. In verse 33 we see that the bread of heaven is for all the world (cosmos in Greek). We get caught up in providing for our tables, but what about this truly global table?

This leads us to the second question for today: Why do we talk about money in church, especially on a day when we are talking about such spiritual things as the body of Christ as the bread for the world? I think it is important to remember that everything in our lives is part of our faith, including our money and time. Bread is used for satisfying both our physical and spiritual needs. We often need to remind ourselves of our priorities as they relate to our faith. The Catholic priest Anthony Demello told a wonderful story about a Hindu yoga student whose teacher left him under a tree on a riverbank to meditate on God. The yoga student had only two possessions: his clothes and a begging bowl. Once a day he walked to the village to beg for food. The rest of the time he spent in contemplation of God. One night he washed out his clothes and hung them on the tree to dry. When he awakened, they had been chewed up by a rat. With great embarrassment, he begged for both food and new clothes that day, and went right back to contemplating God. A few days later he washed out his clothes and hung them up to dry. Once again, the rat chewed them up during the night. What was the yoga student to do? It was unseemly for a man of God to keep begging for clothes. So, he got a kitten to chase the rat. But the kitten was hungry, and soon the yoga student had to beg for milk. It was embarrassing to beg for milk, so he found a stray cow. All went well until the summer heat burned off the remaining grasses, and the yoga student had to beg for cow food. It wasn't good to have to beg for cow food, so when the rainy season came, the yoga student planted some crops. They prospered in the rich soil, but so much of his time was spent farming that he could hardly meditate. So he hired workers to tend his fields, but they needed supervision, which disturbed his meditation. So the yoga student decided to take a wife to oversee the workers so that he could get back to God. She didn't want to live under a tree by the river, so they had to build a house – a large house – for she was soon pregnant. The yoga student grew big and wealthy by the banks of the river. One day when he was sitting under his meditation tree resting, a familiar figure approached. It was his teacher, who surveyed the scene with a wide-eyed look, “student, is that you? Didn't I leave you here five years ago to contemplate God?” The yoga student bowed his head and gestured to his vast estate, “Revered Teacher, I know it seems hard to understand, but truly, this was the only way I could keep my clothes.” It is easy for us to slip into rules and justifications about communion and about our finances and miss the main point. It is essential for us to stay focused on the true meaning of communion as the table of God's gift of love and grace. It is the place where God becomes real. Today the challenge of this table is for all of us to see that this table is truly universal. It is Christ's table of sharing God's love. We are invited to be nourished and to share with our brothers and sisters around the world because we are connected to them through Christ. In your bulletin, there is a list of how we as the Presbyterians in Batavia have responded to the generosity of this table by

sharing with others around the world. Ron Hallman has been our mission chair for the last three years. He is going to share with us today how he sees our international mission efforts connected to the global nature of Christ's table.

Ron:

International Mission Statement

Ron Hallman – First Presbyterian Church; 10/5/08

I never really appreciated or fully understood poverty until Ute and I had the opportunity to visit our daughter Heidi in El Salvador in the summer of 2001 when she was serving as a member of the Peace Corps in the remote village of Alegria. While I had viewed poverty in urban areas of Buffalo and Rochester as well as some rural areas of Upstate New York, it paled in comparison to the kind of abject poverty and basic human need that was so evident in almost every part of El Salvador. Ute and I travelled through to reach our daughter's village. Certainly everything we take for granted on a daily basis in the U. S.: access to clean, fresh water, food, electricity, sufficient shelter, transportation, and access to at least some health care, simply doesn't exist either at all or at least not nearly to the same degree in El Salvador and many other countries as it does in our part of the world. Despite the many deprivations the vast majority of the El Salvadoran people experienced, the other phenomena I noticed was the terrific sense of community they maintained in their small village. People were connected, they helped each other out, most were deeply religious, and they shared their very limited resources with whoever was in greatest need. This was most evident when we visited Heidi's host family in the village of Verapaz, where she stayed when she first arrived in El Salvador back in 2000. There had been a major earthquake in the village and when we visited these people, their small home and indeed, the entire community was in shambles from the earthquake. There was not an intact building or structure left standing. This family was living under a tarp and cooking what they had in a large pot over an open fire. They insisted that we all stay for lunch and they served us despite having very little for themselves. The love that they shared with us that day amidst all the devastation and squalor they were living in is something I will never forget. Despite lacking most of the material things we simply take for granted, there was a sense of tranquility and peacefulness about these people that gave me a sense of the presence of God in their midst. Just perhaps all of our sophistication, technology, wealth, and all of our creature comforts, while making life much more bearable physically, has in some ways the potential for driving a wedge between us and our relationship with God. I'm not suggesting we go back to living life in a more natural state or not assist the people of El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, India, etc., because they are "happy being poor": but rather that we reach out to all world communities to combat hunger, poverty, Aid's and other killer diseases, lack of meaningful employment and educational opportunities, etc., not on the basis that we are better or somehow more worthy than they are because of our economic status, but rather on the basis of sharing our good fortune, time and talents with people who, not because of their own doing, are less fortunate than us in material ways. We should also keep in mind the reciprocal benefit: which is that we will obtain back from these wonderful people their sense of community, family, faith, and God's love, which radiates back to us as a gift arguably greater than any material gifts we can provide. I pray everyday to thank God for my birthright and the opportunity we all have been given to help others in need as God would have us do, whether those persons be in Batavia N. Y. or Alegria, El Salvador.

I want to close with a quote from a Dutch theologian named Henri Neuwen, taken from an article he wrote called "Power, Powerlessness, and Power".

"You and I are called to move from power to power through powerlessness. As fearful, anxious, insecure, and wounded people we are tempted constantly to grab the little bit of power the world offers us. These threads of power make us puppets jerked up and down until we are dead. But insofar as we dare to be baptized in powerlessness, always moving towards the poor who have no worldly power, we will be plunged right into the heart of God's endless mercy. We will be free to reenter our world with the same divine power with which Jesus came. We will be able to walk in the valley of darkness and tears, unceasingly in communion with God, with our heads erect, confidently standing under the cross of our life."

The writer and teacher Leo Buscaglia once wrote, "Don't spend your precious time asking, "Why isn't the world a better place?" It will only be time wasted. The question to ask is, "How can I make it better?" To that question, there is an answer." Amen.