

## WHAT'S IN THE BREAD?

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

October 1, 2017

Scripture: Exodus 16:13-15; I Corinthians 11:23-26

As Sophia in *The Golden Girls* would say, "Picture it." It's the first Sunday in October, 1933. The place is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and the church is Shadyside Presbyterian, a church in one of Pittsburgh's most swank neighborhoods. (There's a word from the 30's, "swank.")

All the CEO's of the steel industry who were Presbyterian gathered on Sunday mornings in regal Gothic splendor to worship God with great music, strong preaching, and stained glass beauty.

Hugh Thompson Kerr was the pastor of Shadyside in a day when all the well-known preachers used all three of their names: Harry Emerson Fosdick, Eugene Carson Blake, Hugh Thompson Kerr. All men, all the time. And Shadyside's service was broadcast on a clear channel station in Pittsburgh, KDKA, 50,000 watts.

Its signal could be heard in the daytime in Western Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, and Ontario. And in the evening you could hear the station throughout the entire Eastern half of the United States. The worship services of the Shadyside Church were re-broadcast every Sunday evening to a far reaching American and Canadian audience.

Dr. Kerr was moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 1930 and that's when he imagined the idea of the whole world celebrating communion on one given Sunday, the first Sunday in October.

By 1933 it was instituted at Shadyside, and by 1936 it was adopted by the General Assembly, receiving a warm reception in a time and a nation torn apart by World War II. The image of all the world gathered at God's table to celebrate the Lord's Supper was an idea with appeal, and with Biblical roots as well.

Of course, our Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, Orthodox and other communions of the world Christian community could have told Dr. Kerr and the congregation at Shadyside that theirs was not the most novel of ideas. In fact, every Sunday and every day for that matter, around the world our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters celebrate the mass in the smallest and most modest of wayside churches located in farmlands and jungles. It is celebrated in the glorious splendor of St. Patrick's Cathedral, and the beauty of St. Peter's in Rome, and in the shabby dark, somewhat forsaken congregations of the Bronx where the rat poison and the matches are stored side by side in a compartment in the altar. And maybe communion is celebrated even today in the rubble and debris of what is left of San Juan.

So the image of the world gathered at a table where bread is broken and wine is poured does two things. It reminds us of the last supper our Lord shared with his disciples the night of his arrest, and it points us to that great banquet beyond time and space and exceeding imagination where God is the host and we are the guests and all the world sits together in peace.

What a different image that is than the threats of war and missiles being launched and tough talk that dominate our nightly news. It is hard to imagine the President and Kim Jung Un sitting at any table together – the peace table, the card table, the communion table, any table. But that is the wild and hopeful dream of this Sunday which is not only World Communion Sunday but the Sunday in which we receive the Peace and Global Witness Offering.

It's interesting that it is the table and its elements of bread and wine that are the symbols of our unity in the Spirit and in the gospel. For so long in its early centuries, the church argued and fussed, as only the church and its theologians can do, trying to locate where and in what way the bread was in fact the *body of Christ*, and where and in what way was the wine *the blood of Christ*.

Roman Catholic and Orthodox teaching believed that when the priest blessed and consecrated the bread and the wine, they were substantially changed, changed in substance with only the appearance of the bread and wine remaining unchanged. This was known as transubstantiation.

Martin Luther came along 500 years ago and argued that while the substance of the bread and wine did not change, nonetheless the body and blood of Christ were *with* the wine and bread. So it was both bread and wine, *and* the body and blood of Christ. A distinction with a difference in the 16<sup>th</sup> century called consubstantiation.

John Calvin and other Reformed theologians came along and said that it was not the bread and the wine that changed so much as it was the believer who changed because of the spiritual presence of the Lord in the celebration of the sacrament itself. This was God's doing, not ours. Not the priest's, nor the people, but the Holy Spirit present among the congregation when the sacraments were rightly and properly administered – that was when and how the sacraments became sacramental.

So the answer to the question, "What's in the bread?" has occupied the church and its theologians for a very long time. In fact if you remember our Exodus passage not only from today but also from last week, the question of our Israelite grandparents in faith was "What is this?..." this substance that God is providing us, this bread from heaven... what is it? Which is, of course the translation of the word "manna," the bread that makes you ask "What is it?"

Paul, in what may be the earliest report of what we know of that last supper in the upper room, tells us how the tradition came to him.

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

So for Paul the meal was a remembrance meal, as all family meals are to a greater or lesser degree, a Passover meal given new meaning.

I say *all* family meals have remembrance in them, and by that I mean the special occasions where people gather in anticipation of memory and in awareness of past occasions such as this. Thanksgiving dinner, Christmas dinner. At table we remember. We remember and give thanks for the ones who are there. We remember fondly and with a touch of sadness as well as joy, those who are not there in body, but who are very much present in spirit nonetheless. Whether there is an empty chair at the table or not, there is a place in our hearts where someone is missing along with all those who are present.

At the Passover meal there is literally a place set and a chair kept ready for old Elijah, the prophet, to stop by and have a bite to eat with everyone. But of course, when that time comes in the Haggadah, the liturgy for the meal, the door is opened and some psalms are recited and there is a pregnant pause. Elijah can come in if he chooses, but *he does not* except to the eyes of faith that see such things, and yet in remembering him in this way he *is* present. The ritual at the Passover meal dramatizes the awareness that there are some who are missing from the table and it will not be complete until *all* are there.

It is, I think, why Jesus said to his disciples about the meal they shared, that they should keep observing that meal until he comes again.

Someone has said that the rhythm of the church is captured in three phrases; "Gather the people, tell the stories, break the bread."

On this world communion Sunday when we Presbyterians, and Christians gather together, tell the stories, and break the bread – we realize that we *need* to be together as a world community more than ever before. The stakes are higher. The threat is greater. The possibility of nuclear incineration of enormous

numbers of people are at the mercy of impulsive and unguarded men. (and I use the masculine noun advisedly)

We need a story of reconciliation and peacemaking, some sign of hope to set over and against the story of threat and fear and annihilation. We need the bread of Christ to strengthen our faith and nourish us for this journey, for there are many trials we must endure and it is only as Christ's body that we can encourage one another in faith and hope of a new beginning.

I've referred in recent weeks to the Ken Burns *The Vietnam War* series on PBS.

The last episode aired Thursday night. It told the story of Watergate and the threatened impeachment of President Nixon. His subsequent resignation. The building of the Vietnam Memorial Wall in Washington and the controversy and eventual healing that it brought.

But in this last episode the most hopeful segment was the final section about the last forty years and our search for reconciliation. President Clinton visited Vietnam in 2000. President Obama visited in 2016.

But the most poignant voices of reconciliation and peacemaking were not the presidential voices or visits but those of the veterans themselves, who, haunted by memories, guilt, and grief, have made trips back to Vietnam and met with former enemies.

These Viet Cong and North Vietnamese soldiers are now old, and grandfathers themselves. They are meeting and getting to know these American vets who are going to villages that had been destroyed and are now rebuilt, telling their Vietnamese hosts their stories and listening to each other as they describe their mournful memories of the loss of friends, and family, and neighbors from the same home town, from the same village. One Vietnamese man a former Viet Cong said,

Some of my comrades who live in cities often meet American veterans. They don't speak each other's language but they are so happy to meet. They hug each other. They treat each other as vets treat vets. We have put the past behind us.

Mike Heaney, an American Army vet, tells of going to visit a provincial group of veterans in North Vietnam, sort of what we would think of as being a VFW gathering here. And after they had checked each other out and realized that this was not a photo op, nor a political thing, that there was no purpose other than to be together and find some peace in their hearts, Heaney says their Vietnamese hosts could not have been more "gracious and loving." Not words that one would normally associate with former enemies – gracious and loving.

There is a picture of Heaney surrounded by these men; old enemies, now the battle weary and aging survivors of a past time, sitting together at a table, with bottles of water that looked for the life of me to be like living water, the cup of salvation, and some food on the table that I think was ever so suggestive of the bread of life.

"They took me under their wing like a brother soldier," Heaney said. And he performed a ceremony honoring the American men he had lost, honoring the men these vets from the other side had lost, and said that they can be at peace now.

"It was a wonderful, wonderful trip," said Heaney. "You don't get closure, but you get some peace. I got some peace."

And maybe that's the deepest meaning of this meal we share with all the world this World Communion Sunday, the hope that we can find some peace in gathering the people, telling the stories, remembering the ones who are here and who have gone before, and breaking the bread in which there is healing.

What's in the bread? What's in the wine? Who's at the table? The Lord is there. O taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed are those who put their trust in him.