

Delicious Mystery

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

10th Sunday after Pentecost - August 1, 2021

Text: Ephesians 4:1-8, 11-16; John 6:22-35

RESPONSIVE READING Psalm 34:1-8

I will bless you, my God, at all times; your praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in you; let the humble hear and be glad.

O magnify the Beloved with me; and let us exalt God's name together.

I sought my Savior, who answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

Look to this One, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.

This poor soul cried, and was heard by God, and was saved from every trouble.

The angel of the Almighty encamps around those who believe, and delivers those who trust.

O taste and see that God is good; happy are those who take refuge there.

SCRIPTURE READING Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.... The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.

GOSPEL READING John 6:22-35

Last week, we witnessed the side by side signs of Jesus: how he fed 5000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish, and gathered the fragments so that none should be lost, and how he walked on the rough sea and brought the disciples' boat safely to land.

The next day the crowd that had stayed on the other side of the sea saw that there had been only one boat there. They also saw that Jesus had not got into the boat with his disciples, but that his disciples had gone away alone. Then some boats from Tiberias came near the place where they had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. When they found him on the other

side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.”

Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Do any of you remember eating Wonder Bread as a child? Remember the slogan? “Wonder Bread builds strong bodies 12 ways.” It cost a quarter a loaf, or something like that. Eating it was like eating foam, or air, totally devoid of taste. It was a great day when whole wheat, sourdough, and multigrain bread hit the shelves. Did Wonder Bread really work wonders? I can’t say.

What’s on our menu today is a different kind of bread: the bread of heaven, the bread of God, the bread of life. The bread that Jesus gives. The bread that Jesus *is*. The people who came looking for something to fill their bellies were confused. Jesus’ answers mystified them further.

This *is* a mystery, but a delicious one. The mystery of communion, the Lord’s Supper, the eucharist, whatever you call it, lies at the heart of the church. The other gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, write about this as the *Last* Supper at the very end of Jesus’ life. The bread and wine are about Jesus’ crucified body and shed blood. John’s *only* story of communion is here in chapter 6, where Jesus feeds 5000 people with two loaves and five fish. It’s all about life: Jesus’ life, your life, and all the broken lives tenderly gathered so that none would be lost. It’s about filling the gaps and emptiness in your life with something that feeds not your body but your soul.

Earlier, I invited you to think about what communion means to you. While you think about it, let me tell you a story about Cabrini Green in Chicago, where I interned. Holy Family Church was a life raft to so many people living there in poverty, despair, and danger. Somehow children found their way to church. Mostly they came without their parents. Holy Family felt safe to them. They’d sit in the front rows and sing the liturgy by heart at the top of their lungs. The age for First Communion there was 10, or 5th grade. Kids any younger than that weren’t expected to understand the mystery that learned men had struggled for centuries to explain. Well, maybe old white men don’t have all the answers. I got to teach the class that year. I started by asking that

question: What does communion mean to you? Their answers came so fast I could hardly keep up: love, hope, joy, togetherness, God, faith, forgiveness, feast, heaven, friends, family, thanksgiving,...on and on. They totally got it. They got every angle. They got that it means different things at different times for different people.

I learned a lot from them. And, because we learn from our failures, this class taught me another lesson. I told you that most kids came to church alone, sometimes with friends, usually not with their parents. But on the big day of their first communion, some parents came, too. One father proudly escorted his son to the communion rail at the front and knelt down next to him. When I came to them, he asked, "Can I have some, too?" I asked, "Are you baptized?" He shook his head. I gave him a blessing instead. That was my mistake. He came in faith, he came in hope, he came with his beloved son and I refused him. God made it clear to me: at this supper, Christ is the host. I'm just another guest, showing up hungry, with a hole in my soul. I'm not the gatekeeper. Not the orthodoxy police. Afterwards I apologized to him, and he brushed it off, so very graciously. But I prayed for God to repair the damage I'd done. Have you ever been turned away? You know how bad it feels.

As a teenager, I refused to be confirmed and take communion because I felt unworthy. I believed I'd be damned forever if I dared to try. The first time I accepted God's invitation to receive the bread of life I was already 28 years old, living in Japan. Right then, it seemed to me time stood still and I really was surrounded by all my ancestors, including my mother who had just died, and all the hosts of heaven singing, "Holy, holy, holy." Heaven appeared on earth. Eternity existed in that moment, not in some far off otherworldly future. But that's my story, or part of it. What's yours? Do you remember your first communion? What was it like having communion over Google Meet this past year? Or coming back together here? You can say it out loud, though you don't have to. How is it for you?

In a few minutes some of us will eat pre-cut gluten-free bread from safe, covered containers, and sip grape juice from tiny plastic cups. Some of us online will use whatever bits of bread and juice you scrounged at home. Maybe you're all alone, or maybe someone dear is with you. What could these crumbs and drops possibly have to do with what Jesus calls "the bread of heaven, the bread of God, the bread of life?" Maybe for you, they truly become his flesh and blood. Maybe for you they're only faint signs, pointing to the real power of his presence. You may wonder: what does my little cracker have to do with a faithful Jewish guy who lived and died 2000 years ago? A man who told people that if they ate and drank what he gave them, they would never be hungry or thirsty again? They didn't understand. Neither do I. I don't think it's about understanding. It's about doing the works of God: simply believing in him, the One sent by God. Or maybe just believing in what he stood for: acceptance, forgiveness, healing, getting right with God and each other and the world. Getting right with yourself. Believing that goodness is not only possible, it's

an option offered to you day after day. Believing that there is something that can fill the hole in the soul. And believing that somehow we're supposed to do this together.

Because one thing that fills the hole is sharing this as a family meal. Whether you're by yourself or with someone dear, or in a crowd of strangers, *you are not alone*. Believing that God actually calls us to do this together sets us apart from hermits praying on a mountain. We can, as Ephesians says, "lead lives worthy of our calling, with humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, trying hard to stay one in the Spirit, bound in peace, sharing our gifts." Are those just words? Just ideas? Or are they actions? Or a path? A way of life?

I believe it's the way of life God designed for us to follow. It's still a mystery. But a delicious one. One that feeds my soul, and yours. To paraphrase Paul again: We each use the strengths we find already living in us to build this church toward one purpose--being the body of Christ. Or in Frederick Buechner's well-known words, "Your ministry happens where your deep joy meets the world's deep need." "Every part working with every other part promotes the growth of all, and builds the body up in love." All are necessary; no one is neglected. This is better than Wonder Bread, this is the real wonder: the bread that builds the church into a strong body, builds strong bodies twelve ways, or a hundred ways, or as many ways as there are people like you, who come in faith, or in doubt, in trust, or in fear, in despair or in hope. But who come, as you have come. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers:

We give thanks, great Creator, for all your good gifts: for the grain ripening in the fields, for beans and tomatoes on the vines, for the oxygen-breathing forests. And we lament the droughts and fires that threaten them. Make us one world, one body, caring for each part, recognizing how our own actions harm one another and the world.

We thank you for the gift of good health care, vaccines, and other measures that protect us and others from pandemic. May we make use of these gifts, and urge others to do so, too.

We thank you for the gifts you have given each one of us; may we use them to build the body and make a more just, fruitful, peaceful, welcoming world.

We thank you for the gift of yourself, freely given in the gift of living bread from heaven that we receive today. May all these gifts comfort those who mourn, and strengthen those who are ill or isolated but still part of your beloved body of believers. For we look to you for our daily bread and for the bread of life that endures forever, in Jesus' name. Amen