



LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 5, 2008

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Lection – John 6:24-35 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 24) 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. (v. 25) When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” (v. 26) 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. (v. 27) 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.” (v. 28) Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” (v. 29) Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (v. 30) 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? (v. 31) Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat’.” (v. 32) 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. (v. 33) For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” (v. 34) They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” (v. 35) 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.”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The first Sunday in October marks the occasion of World Communion Sunday. Though originally a Presbyterian Church (USA) event begun in 1936, World Communion Sunday was adopted by the Federal Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches) in 1940, and has since served as a time to celebrate global Christian unity and strive for better relations across areas of human difference. Having a common day to celebrate the Eucharist across the world, and to reflect on our interconnectedness has made this moment a potent witness to the power of Christ at work in all of us, and across the church universally.

This Sunday is an opportunity for us to recognize that we are all part of something much larger than ourselves, our kin, our kind, or our color; we are all part of the Body of Christ. As such, this moment is a reminder that we are linked to our brothers and sisters of different hues and homelands as one unified Body.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: John 6:24-35

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

World Communion Sunday is a time that resonates with who I am at my core. I am an African American man born of two African American parents who was raised between two households. The one was in Bermuda, where my African American mom married my Bermudian father, and I learned to think of the world beyond the parameters of my American identity. The other was in New Jersey, where my African American dad married my Caucasian mother, and I learned to think of the world beyond the parameters of an African identity. In both homes, I was affirmed in my identity but pushed to see that there is much about who we are that transcends nationality and “racial” identity.

As I grew in faith over the years, I would be challenged to view my identity through yet another lens. It seemed that the multiple aspects of identity that we invest with such meaning in our contexts are mitigated by yet another factor. Being in Christ calls us to see our identities as “tied up and tangled up” in Christ. Because of this, I began to see that there is more that unites the global Christian community than separates us.

I have seen this many times in my life. In my own life, I remember an uncomfortable phone call I received from a Caucasian ministerial colleague. While participating in a program on white privilege, he was asked to invite an African American friend to lunch to discuss their differing views of the world.

After reflecting for a moment, he realized that despite his progressive attitudes and his efforts to preach justice, he had no “black” friends. We became friends over Christian fellowship and shared meals over the next several months. Lunches became Eucharistic experiences as we began to learn from our differences and to explore our common identity in Christ.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

When studying John’s Gospel, we might notice that one of the key aspects of the faith of Jesus seems to be absent. The sacrament of Eucharist, or the ordinance of Communion, in each of the Synoptic Gospels is grounded in the narrative of the Last Supper. In these Gospels, on the night before Jesus is crucified, he celebrates a final festal meal with his disciples. At this moment, Jesus reinterprets aspects of the Passover (Hebrew *Pesach*, Greek *Pascha*) meal and gives them a new meaning based upon his own suffering (Greek *Pascho*). Hence, two familiar elements from Passover Seders take on new significance; the *matzah*, or unleavened bread, takes on new significance as the Body of Christ and the wine becomes Christ’s blood. Thus, in the Synoptics, Christ’s death is commemorated as the New Passover.

But in John’s Gospel, not only is the communion absent from the Last Supper account, the ritual of foot washing has replaced it. Perhaps this is because in John’s Gospel, Jesus’ last supper with his disciples actually occurs “before the festival of the Passover” (13:1), eliminating the natural connection of Christ’s suffering to the Passover and, thus, severing the connection of Christ’s commemorative ritual from the *matzah* and wine of Passover. This Gospel, however, is not void of a founding narrative for Communion.

The founding narrative for the Communion sacrament in the work of the fourth Evangelist is not missing, it is just repositioned. It can be found in the many allusions to bread found in John 6, which culminate into an explicit description of the Eucharistic elements in verses 53-56. The author structures the narrative in this chapter such that the story of Jesus’ feeding of the five thousand serves as the basis of the Communion ritual. Our passage is located in verses 24-35 of this chapter, soon after this evangelist’s account of Jesus’ miraculous feeding. This was no minor miracle, for Jesus takes a young boy’s meal of five fish and two loaves, blesses it, and then multiplies it, making it enough to satisfy the needs of his large audience of poor Galilean peasants, leaving leftovers.

It would have been as if our enslaved ancestors, who survived on leftovers and scraps, were welcomed as guests at an endless buffet. Jesus’ audience sees in him an end to their perpetual hunger. Those just barely getting by on others’ leftovers are finally filled. A story like this resonates with us as a people used to leftover books in public schools, leftover neighborhoods in dilapidated inner-cities, and leftover jobs that nobody else would do. In fact, the only thing we are used to getting enough of is cells in the countless new prisons where one in nine of our men are housed. Getting enough was something to be celebrated. Hence, after the

leftovers were collected, the people seem intent to foster an insurrection and forcibly coronate their new provider their King (v.15). A starving people are eager for someone who can provide what they really need!

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus withdraws from the people, retiring to his mountain sanctuary. When the crowd meets him the next day, he questions their motives for seeking him (v.26). His rebuke occasions the dialogue in our pericope. It is because of their lack of understanding and their desire to have him provide physical bread, that Jesus defines himself as the *artos tes zoes*, the “bread of life” (v.35). In essence, Jesus declares that it is not for tangible reasons alone that we should follow him; there is more at stake than just physical sustenance. Jesus is the bread of life, feeding people such that they will never be hungry or thirsty again (cf. John 4:14). He is the bread that satisfies the needs of the crowd!

On this World Communion Sunday, the members of the global Christian community come together at a common table as a needy crowd. We come from various regions, are comprised of different hues, speak diverse languages, and have competing interests. We are faithful Tutsi and Hutu; we are Israeli Messianic Jews and Palestinian Christians; we are Irish Catholic and English Anglican; we are American and Iraqi believers in Christ. Though we are all in Christ, we keep finding new reasons to hate each other. In the U.S., we are pro-life and pro-choice; anti-gay Evangelicals and anti-intolerance Liberals; we are Republican moral conservatives and Democratic social progressives; we are adherents to the prosperity and the social Gospel. We are a needy crowd, starving for wholeness; but there is much about us that makes the act of Communion, coming together as a common unity, difficult at best.

But in spite of what divides us, the blood and body of Christ is all that we need to truly focus upon to find common ground. We are all part of one body, Jesus’ body. We are all reconciled by the same blood, the blood of Jesus. Jesus has united all of humanity by his death and resurrection, making us all, as Paul says, “one body with many members” (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:18-31). Jesus alone unites us all at one table, satisfying our common need by bridging the chasms that have been formed between us.

In the Eucharist, Jesus is our Wonder Bread. He is not the doughy white-bread framing our childhood peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, but the unifying agent bringing warring factions together as one. The death and resurrection of our Wonder Bread are our collective welcome into the family of God. Like the miracle of the feeding of five thousand, our Wonder Bread is more than enough to bring us together. Jesus is reason enough to find something worth loving in a foreign face; Jesus is cause enough to embrace others who wear different skin; Jesus is exactly the reason we need to put aside our enmity against those whose speak with tongues we cannot decipher. He is reason enough to overcome the chasms between us.

Our Wonder Bread decimates the distances humans have formed. When we take his body and drink his blood, we are being reconciled to him and, of necessity, to each other. Our Wonder Bread forces us to see beyond our differences, enabling us to love the Christ we recognize in others. When we eat from a common table, we have to acknowledge that the same Christ, who lives in us, lives in them, as well. Our Wonder Bread is the bread of life, promising us an eternity together as sisters and brothers in God's own family. When we drink from his cup, we are acknowledging that the blood that saved us has saved others and that, if we wish to spend eternity with Christ, we must spend eternity, of necessity, with them also. As we come together at the table this day, we are united by our Wonder Bread who gave his life to make us one.

Celebration

On this World Communion Sunday, we rejoice that, in Christ, we can come to a common table and share a common feast that was set for us by a Christ who loves each of us enough to die for us. As we celebrate this communion and partake of one body and receive the benefits of one blood, we are part of something much bigger than the boundaries of our "race," or tongue, or nation, or origin. Despite the differences between us, we can praise God that the Savior, who is a wonder, is what we need to make us one.

Descriptive Details

This is a narrative full of details that can be used to enrich sermons: the image of the Sea of Galilee, around where these events take place, full of fishing boats and surrounded by lush green topography. The low lying mountains surrounding this low-altitude sea serve as the place of Jesus' retreat. The image of the crowd of Palestinian peasants should stand out to us for it is their needs that Jesus meets and their misunderstanding of his identity to which Jesus speaks.

Resources

There are resources available that can help facilitate liturgy, sermons, and song selections for this Sunday. Two useful internet resources are:

1. National Council of Churches - online location:
<http://www.nccusa.org/unity/worldcommunionssunday.html> accessed 10 April 2008
2. Additional World Communion Sunday resources - online location:
<http://www.faithstreams.com/topics/christianity/world-communion-sunday.html> accessed 10 April 2008