

“The Lord’s Feast”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
August 19, 2012

John 6: 51-58

As I did my research and preparation for today’s sermon, I couldn’t help but agree with what one pastor, Benjamin Sparks, said. In his words, “Over many years of preaching the lectionary, my friends and I have more than once shamefully confessed to each other that when this text appears as the Gospel reading, we choose from the Epistle or the Old Testament” (Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, © 2009: 356). Indeed, in fourteen years of preaching, I have not once been led to preach on this passage from John. Sometimes, though, I have to allow the Spirit to actually do its work, so that’s why we get to talk about it today!

Last Sunday, we looked at the passage preceding today’s, when Jesus spoke of himself as “the bread of life.” He made a distinction between the manna which the Israelites received in the wilderness of exile, and the living bread which he offers in himself. While God provided for the Israelites’ short-term needs in the manna from heaven, that food did not offer them everlasting life. What Jesus offers in himself, as the bread of life, is a food which sustains, redeems, and offers eternal life for all who seek and accept him into their lives. It is this bread of life which gives us the strength we need for the long-term challenges and needs of life.

While last week’s passage was pretty palatable to our human minds and souls, this week’s might leave us a bit queasy. “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood . . . those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink . . . so whoever eats me will live because of me” (6:53-57). Not exactly the kind of “PG” imagery you’d hope to hear on a Sunday morning, huh?

Why does Jesus have to be so blunt and graphic? How is this helpful for us understanding his point? How do we apply these images to our understanding of faith in the church today?

William Willimon writes: *A few years ago my wife Patsy and I enjoyed a wonderful Canadian movie, The Gospel of John. The movie goes through the Fourth Gospel, word for word, start to finish, in about three hours. We loved the movie. We both found it beautiful and engaging. When I mentioned the movie to a friend of mine, he said that his wife looked at him midway through the film and asked, “Will Jesus ever shut up?”*

John’s Gospel is noted not only for its poetry, its high Christology, and its rich metaphorical imagery, but also for its redundancy. Here we are again, one more time with Jesus as the bread of life, the eternal bread from heaven

(6:51). John's repetitiveness can best be seen as a sign that what is being said is important.

It is also a sign of the difficulty of what is being communicated. It is as if, in this sixth chapter, Jesus knows that what he is talking about is against our natural inclinations, against our accustomed means of making sense, so much so that he must be redundant and repetitive, in order to keep hammering upon our cognitive defenses until we comprehend that when he says "bread," he is not talking about flour, water, and yeast; he is talking about something that has "come down from heaven" (6:51). As modern people, we are conditioned to live in a flattened, demystified world that is only what we can see or touch. The Fourth Gospel tries to train us limited, modern people in the expectation that now the Word has become flesh, we may expect more (ibid).

It is difficult to hear this, over and over from Jesus, as it doesn't fit our "natural inclinations." It certainly didn't sit well with the Jews who were listening to him, who "disputed among themselves, saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'" (6:52) And even later, as we will see next week, Jesus' own disciples had a difficult time accepting his message (6:60). How are we to conceive of eating Jesus' flesh and drinking Jesus' blood, so that we might live forever?

(Remainder of sermon preached behind the communion table.) Thankfully, our Lord gave us symbols and actions which provide us the means to understand his most difficult words. In the bowl and water, we are given a symbol of God's grace for rebirth in the Spirit, and our action of faithful response to follow our Lord. In the bread and wine, we are given a symbol of Christ's flesh and blood, and our action of eating in communion with him, and receiving the spiritual nourishment we need for our journey ahead.

These objects – a table, a bowl, a pulpit – without any context or setting would seem to be just ordinary pieces of furniture. But in the setting of worship, in the context of faith, they remind us of how our God comes to us in human form and speaks to us, teaches us, loves us, and sacrifices himself for us. God did not choose to remain in the heavens and rule from a distance. No, this Word – God's Incarnate Word – "became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (1:14).

And so it is from this pulpit that we read and proclaim God's Word. It is from this bowl that we baptize all who would be followers of Jesus Christ. And it is from this table that we take and eat Christ's body and drink Christ's blood, which has been broken and poured out for all.

In the other three gospels, we have a very clear and unambiguous account of the Last Supper, falling on the night of Jesus' arrest in an upper room. What's interesting about John's Gospel is that while there is a meal in an upper room, there is no explicit account of Jesus taking bread, taking a cup, and saying, "This is my body and blood, given for you." John has Jesus washing the disciples' feet (13:1-20), predicting Peter's denial (13:36-38), and several "I am" statements, most notably "I am the way, and the truth, and the

life" (14:6). But nowhere in John's passion account do we find the institution of the Lord's Supper.

In essence, what we have read today is John's institution of the Lord's Supper. Remember the context of this chapter? At the beginning of chapter six, Jesus feeds the five thousand (6:1-14). All of this discourse by Jesus follows his meeting the masses' hunger with five loaves of bread and two fish. Now, he tells all who would listen that the true bread of life has come down from heaven, and is standing in their midst. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (6:56).

I think we often become focused in the church on the Lord's Supper being only in the context of the Last Supper. This passage and other throughout the New Testament remind us that the sacrament of communion is both the Last Supper and other contexts of Jesus' ministry - all of which point to God's Word coming down to live and dwell among us. After his resurrection, Jesus broke bread with two followers after they had walked the road to Emmaus, and "it was then that their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Luke 24:31). Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus shared meals with his followers and welcomed others into his ministry by breaking bread with them. After Jesus' ascension, Paul gave to the church what he had received from the risen Lord, "for as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). The Lord's Feast embodies all of these meanings and more whenever we gather for the feast which he has prepared.

Perhaps if we deepen our understanding of this meal, it might deepen our appreciation of its meaning and purpose at various times throughout the year. When we eat this meal with Christians all over the world on World Communion Sunday, we hear anew our Lord's call to "go and make disciples of all nations." When we eat this meal with Christian brothers and sisters in our community, we recognize that we are Christ's Body in the act of sharing the bread and the cup. When we eat this meal when we celebrate Christ's birth at Christmas, the Gospel writer's words become real and vivid with the bread and the wine: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth." When we eat this meal at gatherings of the larger church, we are reminded that the early church in Acts broke bread with one another "with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46).

As someone who stands behind this table to "administer" this sacrament, I am struck by two things. One is how in each of our worship services, by the way we serve the meal differently, the table reflects those differences at the end of the meal. In the first service, there is the feel of a formal meal in the dining room, as when the meal is done, all the trays and items are back in their original places. In the second service, there is the feel of a meal in a big household, as the plates and cups are placed back in no particular order, and it is obvious that a meal has taken place due to the broken pieces of bread and half-empty chalices.

One is not better than the other; their differences reflect the various ways we experience this feast as a community of faith. But what is consistent with both is the second thing which strikes me every time I stand behind this table: there are no barriers – either physical or spiritual – between the table and those who wish to partake of this meal. As Presbyterians, we are adamant that “all the baptized faithful are to be welcomed to the Table, and none shall be excluded” (Directory for Worship, W-2.4006). Every time we gather for this meal, Lisa or I will say, “This table is the Lord’s Table. Our Savior invites all who trust and believe in him to share in this feast which he alone has prepared.” Those are not empty words. They are genuine and inclusive, inviting us all to put aside what distracts us, and taste the life-giving food of the Lord’s feast.

The next time we gather at this table, I invite you to remember that God chose not to stay hidden in the clouds, far away from us, his children. God chose to descend to us, be born as a baby, grow into a young man, challenge our preconceptions, teach us in new ways, model leadership as a servant, advocate for the lowliest around us, stand steadfast when falsely accused, and suffer death at the hands of those whom he came to save. This was God’s choice – and we remember, give thanks, and follow that choice every time we gather for this meal.

“Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me” (6:57).

Thanks be to God. Amen.