

“Breaking Bread as if the Future Depends Upon It”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

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Based upon Genesis 14:11-24; Acts 2:42-47

Imagine a theater, dark, and mysterious, filled with that unmistakable theater smell—a combination of dust, mold, paint, and makeup. The audience of gathered strangers is restless, until eleven actors come on stage to stand behind a table covered with bowls of ingredients. With the grace of ballet dancers following a precise choreography, the actors begin combining the ingredients, mixing, and kneading them into dough. They are making bread. Having a bunch of actors make bread on stage seems at first like a strange conceit for a performance. But there is a method to their madness. The actors in this play, called Not By Bread Alone, are both deaf and blind.¹ It took two years for the theater group out of Tel Aviv which created the play, to learn how to accomplish this task of making bread, and to tell their stories in a series of vignettes performed while the bread is baking. The play is about longing for a home, coming out of isolation and into community. It is about how and what we communicate, not just with our voices, but with our bodies and lives as well. According to one reviewer, the actors’ dark, silent world is so far from the common experience of the audience members that watching and listening to them is not an entirely comfortable experience. But in the end, the smell of fresh bread baking, which replaces the theater smell, is a sensory experience which bonds the actors and the audience together. When the bread is ready, both the actors and the audience are ready for it. So the play ends with the actors inviting the audience to join them up on the stage to break bread together.²

I have never seen this play, which came to the U.S. in 2013. But I would like to see it. From what I’ve read about it, it sounds like a powerful and thought-provoking experience. The play is designed to remind those of us who do have sight and hearing, not just how precious those senses are, but also how misleading they can be; for even with good eyes and ears we can still be blind and deaf in other ways, which isolate ourselves and destroy community. I would also like to see the play because I love bread and like the idea of a show which celebrates the power that bread-breaking has to bring people together, and transform strangers into community.

We celebrate the bonding power of bread-breaking every month here at Prince of Peace, when we gather together as a community of strangers and friends, to share the feast that Christ prepared for us. “Do this in remembrance of me,” he wisely told his disciples after breaking the bread. He knew that they would need a ritual to remind them not just of his sacrifice, but also of his presence wherever “two or three are gathered together.” “Get together with others,” Jesus effectively said. “Break bread. Share a cup. And you will proclaim the new covenant that I am making for you, and become the new community that I want to create through you.”

In today’s lesson from *The Book of Acts*, we see that the disciples took Jesus’ words to

¹ See “*Not By Bread Alone*”- a Stage Production by Nalagaat, <http://nalagaat.org.il/en/teater-2-not-by-bread-alone>

² McKiernan, Seamus, “*Not By Bread Alone: A Deaf-Blind Theater Troupe Makes It’s U.S. Premiere*” HUFFPOST, April 3, 2013, retrieved May 2, 2017 from <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/seamus-mckiernan/not-by-bread-alone>.

heart in an almost frantic sort of way. Although we will not celebrate Pentecost until the beginning of June, today's Lectionary text invites us to remember what happened immediately following Pentecost. You may remember that when the Holy Spirit came and danced like tongues of fire on people's heads, they were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the Jewish holiday of Shavuot, which is a holiday that recognizes both the first fruits of the season and the giving of the Law to Moses. There were thousands of people gathered from all over the region for the holiday, which is why the Pentecost story focuses on all the different nationalities and languages that were present that day. Then the Holy Spirit came and touched the hearts of at least 3,000, according to Luke. It was an amazing day.

But after all the pyrotechnics were over, the newly-minted Christians had to figure out what to do next. Jesus was not physically present with them anymore to guide them. Although 3000 people understood the Gospel in their own languages and embraced its truth, they still couldn't really talk to each other. They certainly did not know and love each other yet. So what did they do? They started breaking bread together... a lot. I imagine the original disciples panicking for a minute, looking at all the new converts whom they didn't know or understand, and thinking, "What do we do now with all these people?" Then one of them, perhaps Peter, remembered the Last Supper and said, "I know! Let's do what Jesus commanded that we do. Let's break bread together." So they did. *Acts* says that day by day they devoted themselves to sharing Christ's teachings and praying in the Temple, and then getting to know one another through the breaking bread in their homes. Literally it says that they went house to house breaking bread. The bread-breaking they shared was not just the Lord's Supper. It was also a shared meal known as an *agape* feast, an ancient form of potluck in which people were expected to share grace and love as well as food with one another. *Agape* is the Greek term for self-giving love, the term most often used to describe God's love in the Bible. The *agape* meals the first Christians shared those first few months fed them as much as the Lord's Supper did because they allowed people to get to know each other as well as to know God by sharing love through food.

Several years ago Pam Ausiello did a women's retreat here, I believe, on a popular book by Gary Chapman called The Five Languages of Love.³ Chapman argued that there are five main ways in which people show love: giving, affirming, serving, sharing quality time, and sharing physical affection. I have not read the book, but as far as I know, he did not list food sharing. If I am correct, then that is a major oversight. Across cultures and time, food sharing has been one of the major ways that human beings have shared love. Most cultures affirm that if a stranger visits, you must show him or her hospitality and welcome by sharing food. Likewise, if someone is in trouble, you share your food. That is why people who are grieving are always bombarded with casseroles they can't eat. In my home growing up, if you hurt yourself and went to my mother, she would provide bacitracin and a Band-Aid. But if you went to my father, he would suggest a trip to McDonald's. He showed his love with burgers. Any food will do, however. When author/theologian Victor Frankl was in a concentration camp, a foreman once gave him a tiny piece of bread. Knowing that the foreman must have saved it from his own rations, Frankl

³ Chapman, Gary, The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts (Chicago: Northfield Pub., 2015).

was moved to tears as much by the gesture as by the small piece of bread. “It was the human ‘something’ this man also gave to me—the word and the look which accompanied the gift that made him weep,” he later wrote.⁴

The beauty of the simple gesture of breaking bread together is that it not only reveals the best of humanity, for people of faith, it also reveals the love of God. This has been true since long before the Last Supper and even since before the first Passover, as we can see from today’s Old Testament lesson. I couldn’t resist throwing this story in today because last week when Phil read the lesson from the letter called *Hebrews*, he read that Jesus was a priest of the order of Melchizedek. That hard-to-pronounce name doesn’t mean much to people today because it appears only three times in the whole Bible. The last time is in *Hebrews*, which lifts up the order of Melchizedek as being a higher order of priesthood than even the priesthood of Aaron. The first time is in today’s lesson.

Abram, before he became Abraham, started out his journey into the Promised Land with both Sarai, his wife, and his nephew Lot. Around about the time Abram and Sarai headed into Egypt, they separated from Lot, and not long after that, Lot was captured by the bad king of Elam, who conquered Sodom and Gomorrah where Lot was staying. When Abram heard this he gathered together an army of 318 men and went by night to capture back the spoils of war which were stolen, and to rescue Lot. He succeeded. As he waited for King of Sodom to show up so he could give him back everything that was taken, *Genesis* says that Abram was greeted by another king, King Melchizedek of Salem. The King offered him bread and wine and then blessed him. Abram responded by giving him a tenth of all his belongings, an amount which came to be the amount Jews felt called to tithe to God.

Genesis never explains exactly who Melchizedek was; he just arrives, shares bread and wine and a blessing, and disappears again. There is no record of his family, no record of his reign. The only other reference to him in the Bible is in Psalm 110, a messianic psalm which suggests that the messiah will be both a descendent of David and a priest “in the order of Melchizedek.” So the mysteriousness of his appearance, combined with the facts that Abram gave him a tithe, Melchizedek means “king of righteousness,” and Salem became Jerusalem, the city of peace, has led Christians to speculate over the centuries that Melchizedek at the very least must have been a servant of God, and perhaps may even have been Christ going incognito before his birth. The Jews say he was Noah’s son Shem, who would have been several hundred if not thousands of years old by then. But no one knows.

In the end, we don’t need to know, however. This story is just one more way the Bible affirms that sharing bread and cup together brings us closer to God as well as to each other. But

⁴ As quoted by Marty, Peter, “*Emmaus: Open the Eyes of My Heart, Lord,*” THE LUTHERAN (June, 2012), cited at *Animating Illustrations*, “bread,” HOMILECTICSONLINE.COM, retrieved May 1, 2017 from https://www.homilecticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp...

the two stories together do invite us to think about whether we too can count ourselves as priests of the order of Melchizedek now that we are followers of Christ. In our tradition we believe in the “priesthood of all believers” (1 Peter 2:9). That label is not just for ordained clergy. We are all priests called to ministries of hospitality, love, and reconciliation. God equips us for that calling in part through the meal we call Communion. But how well do we fulfill that calling outside of Sunday morning? How often do you share God’s love through the language of sharing food?

If you are like most people today, the answer is not often. Dinner parties are largely a thing of the past now, as are family meals in many households. Even in the church we have potlucks only three or four times a year. We are all so busy, that grabbing fast food, or eating while standing in front of the sink, is more common in many households than having family or friends over for shared food and good conversation. And even those who do gather to eat often spend as much or more time looking at their phones and having conversations with others elsewhere as they do sharing conversation with those present. As a result, we are more isolated, not just from our friends and family but also from the people who prepare our food. We don’t know the farmers in the Midwest who grow our food or the immigrants who work behind the counter at our favorite fast food joints or the minimum wage employees at the grocery store. Is it really such a surprise that our country then is so divided? When do we ever cross paths with these people in meaningful ways? When do we share the stories of our work and our worries? When do the rich break bread with the poor? When do people of different races or nationalities feast together in our nation? We don’t get together like this often. But we could, and we should because our future depends upon our ability to come together despite our great diversity of languages, practices, and beliefs. Breaking bread together brings people out of isolation and into community. It opens the door to communication which is reconciling, not divisive. It opens the door to God’s grace.

Theologian Miroslav Volf, who grew up in Croatia, grew up watching his parents invite people home after church for Sunday dinner. They often invited people that they did not know well, and even invited people that they did not particularly like. Reflecting on that experience later, Volf wrote: “My parents kept extending the invitation because they thought one should not separate the Table of the Lord at which my father [who was a pastor] presided in the morning from the table of our home at whose head he was sitting at noon. I am not sure how much they knew about the original unity of the eucharistic celebration and the agape meal, but they clearly practiced their inseparability. As the Lord gave his body and blood for sinners, so we ought to be ready to share something of our very selves with strangers. The circle of our table fellowship was opened up by the wounds of Christ, and a stranger was let in.”⁵

Inspired by his words, the play, and of course Scripture, I would like to try a little experiment here at Prince of Peace to help us rediscover the power and value of bread breaking. We are a pretty close community and know each other better than people do in large mega-

⁵ Volf, Miroslav, *Against the Tide: love in a time of petty dreams and persisting enmities* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Pub. Co., 2010), 168.

churches. But we don't all know each other well. So at the end of worship I will be standing in the back with names in a bread pan. They are the names of the people in our current phone directory. (If you are a visitor and would like to participate, put your name on the piece of paper the usher handed you and drop it in the offering plate.) If you are willing to break bread with someone, pick a name on your way out. Then set up a time when you can have a meal with that person. You don't have to cook. You can go out to a restaurant or get some other pre-made food if you like. But have a meal with someone. You may end up with someone you know well. If that's the case, use the time to talk about deeper things than you can talk about over coffee hour. And if you get a name of someone you don't know at all, use the time to get better acquainted. If you like it, then try it with someone outside of the church. We are all very busy, and some of us are very shy too. But we all have to eat. So let the meal we share together here today inspire you to share another outside the church, knowing that wherever two or three are gathered, God is there.

I'd like to close today with a video out of Canada called "Eat Together."⁶ May it inspire us to break bread not just with those within this Church, but with others as well. Amen [**video shown.**]

⁶ President's Choice, "#eattogether", YouTube video, Posted [Dec. 31, 2016], retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vDuA9OPyp6I>