

Summary:

“Blessing the Table,” the next in our series, “A Place at the Table,” on Holy Communion, by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, OH, Sunday, October 20, 2019

Detail:

Two weeks ago we began this series by talking about how, in the opening of the Great Thanksgiving Prayer for Holy Communion - The Lord be with you, *and also with you* - that God is setting the table for us, acknowledging that God is present with and in us, and invites us to remember that by being at table together.

A God who is present - here, now, always - is a central tenet of our Christian faith. God is not “out there” somewhere, controlling our lives as though we are pawns on a chessboard, but God is right here, right now, inviting us to share in love and fellowship in all ways, but most particularly around the table.

And we talked about how table fellowship or a dinner outreach was a significant part of how Jesus actually ministered in his first century setting - dining with anyone and everyone, from the pious to the pretenders, from the saints to the sinners. Breaking bread around the table, in the homes of those considered “unworthy” was standard operating procedure for Jesus.

So this week we consider a larger piece of the Great Thanksgiving Prayer. “Blessed are you and blessed is your son, Jesus!” the prayer continues, reciting for us again how Jesus invited all to the table of love—especially those considered outsiders by many.

He healed the sick, fed the hungry, touched the “untouchable” and encouraged us to have similar “table manners”—connecting the food

we eat together at this table to the call to create a better world for all people.

John Wesley talked often of the sacraments being what he called “means of grace,” that is, they were ways in which or means by which we are particularly enabled or opened to experience the grace and love of God.

There are other means of grace - prayer, meditation, and study of Scripture, for example - but these two are most special because they are sacraments, acts that are made holy for us specifically because they were instituted by Jesus Christ

We spent several weeks after we began ministry together in July, talking about the idea of grace.

Grace is the unmerited love of God, that of God which is freely given to all of us for the forgiveness of our sin. There is no bargaining, there is no quid-pro-quo, it is a gift, freely given out of the love that God has for us and that cannot be taken away. Grace is a blessing we receive that compels us to be a blessing to others.

In our communion prayer we say the words, “Blessed are you,” talking to God, praising God, and then “Blessed is your Son Jesus Christ.” And the communion liturgy then recounts God’s saving acts in history, including the saving work of Jesus Christ. “Blessed are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ.”

Blessed to be a blessing.

Our liturgy then moves, after what are called the “words of institution,” where we recount the story of Jesus and the disciples at the last supper, to a very specific invocation. Visually, if you watch, you’ll see the hands and arms of the pastor or priest move at this point in the liturgy, from a position of prayer (arms outstretched) to a position of invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit (arms either upright or arms extended with palms down over the bread and the cup) calling for God to bless the bread and to bless the cup.

We did the same *type* of thing in the Baptism liturgy earlier in what we call the Thanksgiving Over the Water, where we invited the presence of the Holy Spirit to come into the water, to bless the water, to make the water holy. Holy water is not holy because of its source.

Rather, it is water into which the Holy Spirit has been invoked, has been invited, and through which God’s grace is enacted, God’s blessing given.

Similarly, giving blessing, saying blessing, offering a blessing is an invocation of the presence of the Holy Spirit in one way or another into a person’s life, into a situation, into a community.

We do that formally and specifically in the Baptism and Communion liturgies, but we also do that in every day life when we lift up one another in prayer.

When we hold another in prayer we are in effect saying, “God, bring your Spirit into this person’s life, into the circumstances they’re dealing with right now, into their future course of study or course of work, whatever that may be.” When we pray for one another, in embracing

in grace or carrying out acts of mercy for one another, we're being a blessing to that person - we're being Christ to that person.

In Holy Communion, though, we not only ask God to bless the bread and the cup, but to transform those elements into the body and blood of Jesus Christ for us. This is not transubstantiation as the Roman Catholic Church practices, where the elements are understood to change into the actual body and blood of Christ; no, we ask the Spirit to transform them into the body and blood for us, that we might become the body of Christ in all the world.

In other words, we are inviting our own transformation - we are asking God to change us.

When we pray this prayer, when we come to the table that Jesus has set for us, we are inviting God to bless us, to reshape us, to mold us into the image of God that God desires us to be. And along with Holy Communion today, we invite God's empowering and transforming presence in the sacrament of Christian Baptism as well.

As we join in community, and we always do baptism within the community because it is as much a community covenant as it is a personal covenant, we join together in calling for the Holy Spirit to be present, not only in the water that is used, but also in the life that is presented, in the community that has gathered, and in the promise that we make to one another - that they might not be empty words but might be lived out with and for one another.

For both of these things we use a liturgy - what we often think of as merely the words that we say.

In fact, the word “liturgy” actually means “the work of the people.” The acts, the words, the position of our hearts during these sacraments is our work as the people of God in and for those who come before us in the name of God.

When we join at Christ’s table and ask God to bless the bread and the cup we also ask God to bless us, that in union with Christ, we might be transformed into bread for the world. When we are blessed, it is certainly for our own sake, but not only for our own sake.

We are blessed that we might be a blessing.

We are transformed so that we might no longer be merely “of” this world. Rather, we are of God’s “world,” the Kin-dom of God, even as we are present “in” this world that God seeks to transform through us.

And there is little doubt that the world needs to be transformed. Our calling from God is to begin, first within our selves, and then here, in our community, to both be and to bring the transforming love of God to those we encounter here in our little corner of Westerville.

What might it look like to be the bread of Christ to our closest neighbors? According to information given to me by Otterbein University staff, 32% of the student body falls within federal poverty guidelines, which includes food insecurity. One in three of the students who live just outside our walls are food insecure, that is, not sure either when or where their next meal will come from. Over 700 people either serve or are served by Promise House, the campus food pantry ministry.

Food insecurity is an issue right outside our doors, and perhaps within our doors as well.

Jesus sought to transform how we thought about the common meal through his teachings and his practice.

In our scripture passage today, he takes on that mission once again. He begins by publicly challenging the very order of the people at the table.

He first addresses the invited guests, saying that those who come to the table seeking honor for themselves have not yet grasped the ways of God.

The order at the table should be determined, not by the guests, but by the host, he suggests.

But Jesus then turns to the host and criticizes his choice of guests. He should not be inviting those who can benefit him but, rather, 'the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind' (v13), who would be unable to repay him. In both cases, Jesus issues a call to reverse the normal order of things. A different kind of table etiquette, this great reversal characterizes life before God.

Luke 14:7-14 also has implications for our ordinary meals. He suggests here that as his followers, as Christians, we should also practice a hospitality that includes those members of the church with whom we might otherwise not ordinarily socialize - our usual circle - as well as people from beyond the church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer profoundly observed that what holds the community of faith together is not commonality of social interests or identities but rather Christ alone. Christ sits at all of our tables, calling us into fellowship with people from beyond our immediate circle of friends or sphere of influence. Jesus' whole life is centered on inviting into the presence of God those who neither expect nor are thought deserving of such an invitation. And he expects us to do the same.

He expects us, that is, to stop counting the costs, benefits, and rewards of our actions and live from a sense of abundance and blessing. Thought of another way, we shouldn't provide Monday morning coffee and donuts and we shouldn't serve hundreds of plates of spaghetti or midnight pancakes to the students on the nearby campus because we hope or expect that they might become part of our church - that's making it all about us - we should do it because they're hungry and Jesus told us to feed the hungry, to feed his sheep.

Jesus calls us to re-shape the communion table, the community table, in whatever ways will reach those who need to be fed in one way or another.

This week you re-shaped the table and fed us and our family, both literally and spiritually, in our time of need and in the midst of our grief.

You nourished us not only with bread and cup, but also with the love of Jesus Christ.

Blessed are those who mourn, Jesus said, for they will be comforted.

When we open our doors and our table in Christ's name to those who may not even know that they need to be fed, we are calling the Holy Spirit to be present in and with those God might send our way -

knowing that in each of them we receive Christ in many of his distressing disguises.

A few weeks ago I shared with you in another message the video of the group U2 performing their song, "One," with its message "we get to carry each other."

This past week you carried us. Lynn and I and our family have been the gracious recipients of your blessing this past week as we dealt with the shock and grief of losing our son-in-law to suicide.

No words can describe the depth of the pain we continue to feel or the size of the hole that his death leaves in our lives. Our words are insufficient to express to you the love we have received from all of you, whether it was through your words, cards, prayers, or the abundance of food with which you blessed us.

Many, many times, we were reduced to tears, not just by our grief, but by our deep gratitude for all of you and the love with which you lifted us up and carried us when we could not walk on our own. That is, in part, what the congregational response in the baptism liturgy is all about; we don't walk alone - we never walk alone - when we are part of the community of believers, the family of God.

The prayer of my heart would be that none of you have to walk the journey that our family is walking right now, but my head tells me that some of you have probably walked this way before us and know what lies ahead. I do know this, we couldn't ask for a more loving, caring, compassionate, and Christ-filled church family to carry us through than what we have with you.

So on behalf of Lynn and I, Jill and Aiden, and all of our family, we offer the deepest and most heartfelt thank you!

Yea, though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we fear no evil, for thou art with us, thy rod and thy staff they comfort us.

Theologian David Lose would remind us that, “there is something simply joyful – and frankly unbeatably fun – about giving to others out of a sense of abundance. And that’s what Jesus is inviting here. To stop counting and start giving and blessing.”

And he continues by inviting us to, “keep in mind Jesus’ particular focus on social relationships.

And to ask what it would be like to live into the freedom to stop calculating our social prestige and stop worrying about what others think and simply be kind to everyone around us, particularly those who are not often the recipients of kindness. What would it look like at work, at school, and at the places we volunteer or play sports or socialize, to look out for those who seem off to the margins and to invite them into the center by inviting them into our lives?

“While I realize that grammatically Jesus’ words are phrased as commands, I really think Jesus means them to be an invitation, an invitation to a life freed from the unnecessary constraints and burdensome worries of what everyone else thinks, an invitation to experience the joy of playing “God’s helper” in handing out the abundant gifts of dignity and worth and value with which we have been blessed.”

And I think Lose is right. We need a break – even if we don’t always realize it – from the relentless counting, weighing, calculating and judging that our culture encourages. We need a reminder of the joy

that comes from blessing others without regard for how that might benefit us.

So may we be both reminders and reminded of the joy of gathering around the table, with friends we know and friends we don't yet know, with our blood family and with what I might call our bread family, of blessing one another and of being a blessing to one another, in the name and presence of God the Creator, Jesus Christ the Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our Sustainer. Amen.