

Sunday, Aug. 16, Sermon
Mary Kathleen Duncan, pastoral intern
Scriptures: John 6: 51-58 and Proverbs 9: 1-6

Today is potluck Sunday...the best Sunday of the month at Columbia Presbyterian! After worship we will head over to Hazelwood Hall and enjoy dishes prepared in love by our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We are sure to have delicious crock-pot concoctions, fried chicken, casseroles, salads and of course desserts!

The food, however, is nothing in comparison to the fellowship that will be present at each table...conversations about the start of school, anticipation regarding the upcoming trip to Montreat, laughter at a funny story.

Potlucks are such a special tradition for our church family but we all also have other wonderful memories and traditions in our own families and friendships that center around the table...around food...Thanksgiving, Fourth of July picnics, smores around the campfire, Christmas cookies baked by neighbors...Food and fellowship around the table are central to our lives as human beings...It is necessary to nourish ourselves with food for survival but it is also important to our social lives...With these images in our minds about meal fellowship, let us now listen for the word of our Lord as it comes to us from John 6: 51-58.

When Mary was about nine years old her father, who was a devout Jew from Galilean region, took her to a grassy hill beside the sea to see about a famous man of the region named Jesus. This Jesus had been healing people in Jerusalem at the Temple...he even healed people that had been ill for longer than Mary had been alive. And now her father wanted to see what this man was all about...apparently he had even been calling Yahweh his father...making himself equal with God and some people were not pleased with that.

As Mary and her father sat on the mountainside, as close to this Jesus guy as they could get, the crowd kept growing and growing until there were thousands of people all around them. Just as Mary began to get hungry, the man named Jesus held up some bread and fish. From where Mary was sitting, it didn't look like much, but Jesus gave thanks to Yahweh for the food and then he gave every single person present a portion of the bread and fish...enough to fill them up as a meal at home would. All were amazed...how did he get enough food to feed everyone? Some people were so amazed at his power that they wanted to make Jesus the king of Israel...something they hadn't had in a long time but he left before the people could tell him their plan.

The next day Mary and her father went back across the sea to find this amazing Jesus guy again. They couldn't believe what miraculous signs he had done and they had seen it with their own eyes! They were curious...they had to learn more about him. When they and the other people who had been on the mountain and eaten the food Jesus provided found him at the synagogue in Capernaum, he began to teach them. Mary didn't really understand everything he was saying but she did catch some of his words and phrases...manna...eternal life...bread of life (artos o zwn)...Son of Man...eat my flesh (o trwgn mou thn sarka)...drink my blood...these words were confusing to her but they sounded somewhat familiar...the meal she shared with the large

crowd on the mountainside and Jesus' strange words made her remember some of the sayings and stories of her Jewish community in Galilee...they reminded her of Moses and the people wandering in the wilderness and eating manna Yahweh provided after they had participated in the exodus from Egypt...they reminded her of something her father had recited to the family before...Wisdom...has slaughtered her animals...she has set her table...“Come, eat of my bread...” She looked up at her father...pulled on his tunic and asked...father...does this remind you of our history...of what you told us the other day...about wisdom?

Who is Jesus? Who is God? These are questions that our scripture passages from today bring to my mind. These are questions that the ancient Israelite community wrestled with throughout their history as a people. And these are questions that Christians continue to gnaw on at times during their faith journeys...maybe you struggled with these questions during your confirmation class as a teenager...perhaps you asked yourself these questions when you joined the church for the first time as an adult...maybe questions like this plagued your mind after a trying time in your life...maybe there are some of us that continue to struggle with these questions today, even as we are active in the life of the church and strive to live faithful lives.

In our passage from John 6, Jesus is trying to tell the people who he is so that they will believe in him. This crowd of Jews from the first century had been fed a great meal by Jesus (commonly known as the feeding of the 5,000) and while they were in awe of his power and his teaching, they still didn't understand who Jesus was or what he was brought to earth to do. He used common images to convey something about his nature that would resonant with the people...abundance of wine at a wedding in Cana, water at a well in Samaria, and now bread on a hillside above the Sea of Galilee and a synagogue in Capernaum. Jesus used common images that satisfied...wine, water, bread to say...these earthly things satisfy your needs for a while and then they fade...but I am so much more than these things...one that believes in me will have eternal life and satisfaction.

John 6 has a very Eucharistic quality to it. Any time I read it, I am reminded of celebrating communion with my brothers and sisters in Christ. In this passage, Jesus shows us that he is the ultimate host. Not only will he feed thousands of people on a grassy hill, he invites us to feast on his very own body...on his love, grace, mercy, truth, compassion, righteousness...in fact...he sacrifices his body for us! In the original Greek of this discourse, two different words are used for what our English versions translate as “eat.”

In verses 51-53 the word *phagein* (phagein) is used which means to “eat” or “consume.” Beginning in verse 54, Jesus uses the word *trōgō* (trogo) which means “to eat, to chew”. Robert Kysar, Professor of Preaching and New Testament Emeritus at Emory's Candler School of Theology goes so far as to define trogo as “to gnaw,” like an animal consumes food. Jesus, our ultimate host, wants us to seek him...to feast on him like an animal gnaws on its prey...the food that provides it survival. Gnawing is to tenaciously devour the food off the bone...to not be satisfied until you have gotten it all...every last morsel! Friends, this is our task in life...to “gnaw” on the goodness that is Jesus Christ. To get tenaciously devour every last morsel of Jesus' wisdom, humility, and truth.

Proverbs is the compiled communal sayings of the Israelite community. The sages of Israel recorded these sayings to preserve the teaching of Israel and to reveal to the people something about the nature of their God—Yahweh. Chapters 1-9 of Proverbs are the lessons of a parent to his child and in our passage from Proverbs today that parent is telling her child about wisdom. Wisdom was greatly revered in the ancient near east and the community of Israel cherished wisdom as a gift from God.

Proverbs 9: 10, which follows our reading from this day, states, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” In her new commentary on Proverbs, Christine Yoder speaks of wisdom as having “many facets” and as “a worldview, a web of meaning that connects oneself to others, the world, and God.” She goes on to say that wisdom must be “pursued tenaciously everyday of one’s life; it is in the mind and heart as a gift from God...the quest for wisdom is vital.”

Yoder compares wisdom’s table with other table scenes from the Bible: “Biblical narratives often describe the table as a place of discernment, where host and guests may glimpse God and learn about God’s activity in the world.” Wisdom, she says, “requires one to choose a new direction and lose an attitude,” when accepting the invitation to her table. One must choose to gnaw on wisdom...on discerning God’s activity in the world...on discerning what connect us to others each and every day.

Both of these passages use the common & vital images of food and table fellowship to describe the nature of God...of Jesus...to the community. These images excite our imaginations today as they stimulated the community of ancient Israel in their time.

Personally, these passages bring images to my mind of table fellowship I have recently experienced like our monthly potluck here at Columbia Pres. and the smores gathering I shared with my friends in the Village at Columbia Seminary last week. Jesus described himself as living bread that came down from heaven...bread, food, nourishment...it is the most vital need in human life and we often eat with others surrounding us...just as Jesus did on the grassy hill and in the upper room...just as wisdom invites us simple humans to do in Proverbs.

Both of these passages also possess an underlying message of two paths. Fearers of God can either chose to dine at wisdom’s table or the table of folly. We can either choose to believe in Jesus and have eternal life or go on eating the earthly bread that will never fully satisfy. I want to be clear that as children of God...God chooses us...God claims us in the waters of baptism and will love us until we turn grey and beyond...but as people of faith...as people of Christ we do have choices. Like Tom said last week...there are always going to be lures in the world calling our names...just like folly...lust, envy, power will call to us asking us to join their table. At this table we will find “stolen water” and “bread eaten in secret”¹ not the bread shared with friends around the table of our Lord.

Wylie Hughes, one of my friends from seminary, posed an interesting question via his Facebook status this week: “We all get hungry. But do we eat for nourishment or satisfaction?” This, in a

¹ Proverbs 9: 17

nutshell, is the option our God gives us in the person of Jesus Christ: do we want to satisfy ourselves with the bread of this world that grows moldy and stale or do we want to nourish ourselves with the wisdom-producing BREAD OF LIFE...Jesus Christ who will always be there to sustain us through more trials in life than the desire for earthly food...Jesus Christ who will always welcome us to his table in love.

We can choose to satisfy and nourish ourselves with Jesus Christ. We can choose to sit and dine at his table...his table that is more than just a communion table...the table of Jesus Christ is the WORLD. Friends, we must strive to feast on the Bread of Life and follow true wisdom and serve God's table which is indeed the world!

God in Jesus Christ is the one who invites us to the table...we are invited to God's own table...God's creation...to eat the Bread of Life that will never fail to satisfy...that nourishes us beyond imagination...that will never grow moldy or stale. God in Jesus Christ also calls us to be the table for others in this world...to feed them with heavenly bread...to share the love of God...the grace of God with our sisters and brothers.

I have seen and participated in examples of this in the past few weeks: a group of women from the church gathered around the bedside of Sara Obert at the Presbyterian Village singing "Jesus Loves Me" and praying the Lord's Prayer, these same women (and Tom) gathering around a table a Wallace's BBQ to share fellowship in the name of Christ, members and friends of our congregation taking the time to answer questions the children of our church have about bread...about Jesus, the joining together of the whole congregation to replenish our small but mighty food pantry, members of the congregation making the bimonthly trip to the Atlanta Food Bank to transport food to our neighbors at the housing initiative on Memorial Drive, the youth group and advisors breaking the bread of chicken sandwiches, hamburgers, and French fries together in Helen, Georgia, before tubing yesterday.

So...who is Jesus...who is God...friends, we will wrestle with the questions throughout our lives, just as our fictional Mary and her father did when they saw Jesus with their own eyes and were fed by the bread broken by his hands...but there is one thing we can be certain of...Jesus Christ is the BREAD OF LIFE...the ultimate host, who invites us to dine at his table and serve the world!

As we enjoy our potluck today know that we are sharing in the BREAD OF LIFE together...as the children of God...as the body of Christ. As we enjoy the delicious food and uplifting conversation, let us rejoice in the fact that we are God's holy table...we are sharing the Bread of Life with each other. Thanks be to God...Amen!