

“...and they remembered” – by Eric Schrag

This week I went into an office to set up a computer and the employee in the office was listening to talk radio. The host of the radio show said, “One cannot be a democrat and claim to be Christian”. I know a lot of democrats that to me do a pretty good job of trying to exemplify Christ’s call to us in their behaviors and actions. I also know a lot of republicans that do a pretty good job of working to exemplify Christ’s call to us in their behaviors and actions. That extremely divisive comment is not isolated. I am sure each of you come across similar comments for any side of any issue swirling around on social media, or in offices, or in homes or churches. As we gather today to celebrate World Communion Sunday it was a stark reminder of how far away from true communion we are and how badly we need to personally and corporately come to the table.

For many of us, when we hear the word communion we think of the ritualistic act of Christ’s body broken for us in the bread, and blood poured out for us in the wine. In the dictionary the first definition of communion is an act or instance of sharing. The second is the sacrament and the third is an intimate fellowship as in communion with nature. That comment I overheard on the radio stood out to me this week as I reflected on our shared communion today and the different definitions of this word. I thought of our responsibility as Christians to follow Christ’s call in our words, behaviors and actions. In the ceremony of Christ’s broken body we are given an example to humble ourselves and be open to true communion with the spirit and with one another as we gather around the Lord’s table. Will you pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts find acceptance in your sight, oh Lord, our rock and redeemer.

As I have been thinking about a sermon on World Communion Sunday, or our celebration of World Communion Sunday a week late, I kept coming back to bread. In part because I just love bread. I love to bake bread, I love the smell of yeast and the skill it takes to master each loaf, I love the way bread satisfies, it’s versatility, and few things provide comfort like a fresh baked slice of bread. I remember lunches at Grandma Schrag’s - you always HAD to have bread, and so often we would gather to eat, pray together, start passing the food, and Grandma would say, Oh Goodness, I forgot the bread. Bread was essential.

I am not alone in my love of bread. Think about how many times bread is referenced in the bible. Think about the importance of bread in Jesus’ instruction to us. Last Sunday I was at Bethel College Mennonite Church to hear the boys sing, and Pastor Joanna Harader preached on Parables. The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds[a] of flour until it worked all through the dough. She must have been making a big loaf with 60 pounds of flour, and had strong forearms to mix that batch!

This week as I researched bread and scripture I came across Pastor Kendall Vanderslice who did her graduate work on bread and theology, she is both a pastor and professional baker, and wrote a book called Bake and Pray: Liturgies and recipes for baking bread as a spiritual practice. Kendell says: “It might sound strange, but after years of baking professionally and in my home, I’m convinced that there is no better way to understand the role of bread in Scripture than by actually baking it. Feeling the transformation of flour and water into a tacky dough, seeing the development of gluten that takes place in the hours ahead, then smelling the final death of the yeast as the loaf takes form in the oven - it teaches you that bread is not merely a metaphor but a tangible means of knowing God in our hands and on our tongues.” Communion - knowing God in our hands and on our tongues.

The importance of bread is nothing new to us as Mennonites traveling here and bringing red winter wheat. Grain has sustained us from our beginnings on this land, Grain crucial component in the making of bread, and at its most basic, bread is made of just four ingredients: flour, water, yeast, and salt. While simple in ingredients, bread is a difficult skill to master. Variances in flour type, in water temperature, and in the humidity outside that can affect the outcome of a loaf. Bakers can commit their entire lives to the craft of breadmaking and still forever have more to learn.

Perhaps this simplicity and complexity is what makes it such a good metaphor for Jesus, and a tangible way to articulate the importance of God's provision for our needs both physically and spiritually.

When we moved to Goessel our first visitor was Nancy Miller who brought us a fresh loaf of fresh bread and jar of homemade jam to welcome us to the community. Bread has always been a means of welcome, and while bread is a useful sign of hospitality, it's also a sign of something much deeper. Our forefathers knew all too well the importance of inexpensive sustenance, something many of us don't truly understand these days.

Remember how the people of Israel complained to Moses about the prospect of starving in the wilderness. Slavery in Egypt was bad, but they wondered whether freedom was worth it if they were just going to die in the desert. God answered their cries with manna and later with water from the Rock of Horeb. With their most basic needs met they were now ready to continue their journey toward the promised land. As Gandhi articulated: "There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread." For the Israelites in the desert, and many people across the world presently, this physical hunger is so powerful that it must be tended to if we're to be open to anything else.

But this physical bread, though it's essential, it isn't sufficient for abundant life. As Jesus concluded his forty-day fast in the wilderness, he was famished, but when the tempter suggested that he could satisfy his hunger by turning stones into bread he answered: "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4).

It was the first day of the week -- just a few days after Jesus' execution on a Roman cross. Although there were rumors that he might be alive, these rumors weren't enough for two of Jesus' followers who were making their way to the town of Emmaus. Their heads were down, full of sorrow because the one whom they believed would bring hope to their lives was dead. But along the way, they met up with a man, who didn't seem to know what was happening in Jerusalem, but whose understanding of the scriptures brought peace to their hearts. Then, as they broke bread together, their eyes were opened, and they realized that the one who had explained the scriptures was Jesus - and they remembered. Breaking the bread had served to open their eyes to the fullness of God's presence in their midst.

There is another story of bread that is found in all four gospels. Jesus feeds the 5000 with a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. The people's physical hunger was satisfied, at least for the moment. But then in John's gospel in chapter 6 the people come looking for Jesus the next day. They had been fed once, and would like to make this a regular occurrence. In exchange for bread, they're willing to give their allegiance to Jesus and his cause.

Jesus' response doesn't make the folks happy. Instead of the physical bread that they request he offers himself as the bread of life. He invites them to feed on him, because the physical bread, while it might sustain us for a moment, can't sustain us for eternity. They are disappointed and even offended. They seem to be caught up in the literal and can't understand that while bread is important we can't live on bread alone. Jesus offers himself as the Word that sustains the spirit, bringing fullness of life.

When Jesus says the words; "I am the Bread of Life", what do you hear in them?

Do you hear an invitation to go deeper into the life of God by feeding on the bread that reveals to us God's presence and purpose for the world? This bread and this cup stand as a reminder that God is not far from us, but that God is with us and in us, giving us strength and encouragement to continue the journey to the promised land. For this journey, we need the physical bread that will sustain our bodies, but we will also need spiritual bread to sustain our soul. This seems especially true in these divisive times when we don't always know where to turn.

Because this is World Communion Sunday we are reminded that millions of other Christians have heard the same invitation, and so as we join together at the Lord's Table and partake of the Bread of Life, we find union with God and with one another. Even as our lives are nourished by the Word of God who became flesh in the person of Jesus, and embodied God's presence for us, we are united with one another as we gather around the Lord's Table and share in his meal as the whole body of Christ on earth. This gathering, this communion in every sense of the word, is what is needed so much now.

I'm glad my dad isn't here because I am sure I won't get it right, but many of us have heard of the Marburg Colloquy. The Marburg Colloquy was a 1529 meeting between Protestant leaders, primarily Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, to create a united front against Catholic forces.

The meeting was organized by Philip of Hesse to forge a political and military alliance between German and Swiss Protestants, who were facing pressure from the Catholic Holy Roman Empire. Martin Luther, represented the German Reformation, and Ulrich Zwingli, representing the Swiss Reformation.

The theologians found common ground on major doctrines, including the Trinity, justification by faith, and baptism. Their issue of contention was the Lord's Supper. Martin Luther argued for the "real presence" of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist, based on the literal interpretation of Jesus's words in the Gospel. Ulrich Zwingli believed the bread and wine were symbolic and that Christ was only spiritually present in the Eucharist, as his physical body was in heaven.

Because of the unresolved conflict the two sides could not agree to an alliance. While they agreed on 14 of 15 theological articles, their fundamental disagreement over the nature of the Eucharist prevented a unified alliance. Couldn't agree - sound familiar?. Their "disagreement" had important consequences for the spread of the Reformation, and it reminds us that the table of unity too often becomes a place of division. Two very strong persons of faith, in 1529, unable to agree while at the table.

But the table isn't ours to control, and so in the Spirit of God's presence we gather today around the One Table, as the one body of Christ, inclusive of our differences. Abandoning our temptation to divide, and offering ourselves with openness, to truly receive Christ. A necessary reminder of Christ's sacrifice, and promise.

Today as we gather at the Lords table here are five things to reflect upon.

Look inward. Examine your own heart and temptation to divide. The areas God is calling you to work on. Look for the things that might be weighing on your conscience and know that Christ's sacrifice provides forgiveness as you move forward.

Look back. Think about the sacrifice Christ made for you. The sacrifice that he made for each of us - not just those like us. Reflect on the unimaginable love that was poured out for you.

Look Up. Draw near to God with a receptive heart, with an eagerness and willingness to go where called. To meet the stranger, to share Christ's love to those with whom you disagree.

Look around. See this wonderful community of believers all gathered to partake in one shared loaf, signifying our unity together in Christ. Be a part of true communion with one another, and communion with the larger world.

And look Forward: Proclaim the good news. Look forward with hope for the world that is to come, and can yet be.

This morning, we are the travelers to Emmaus. Finding ourselves in different places physically, emotionally, spirituality - walking down the road, in our own sadness, frustration, division. Today, as we gather around the Lord's table, let us not forget the one walking right alongside us, and as we break bread - let us remember.