

***“Room at the Table”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**World Communion Sunday**  
**October 1, 2017**

**Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 25:6-10a**

<sup>6</sup>On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. <sup>7</sup>And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. <sup>8</sup>Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

<sup>9</sup>It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. <sup>10</sup>For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

**New Testament Reading: Mark 8:1-10**

<sup>1</sup>In those days when there was again a great crowd without anything to eat, he called his disciples and said to them, <sup>2</sup>“I have compassion for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. <sup>3</sup>If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will faint on the way—and some of them have come from a great distance.”<sup>4</sup>His disciples replied, “How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?” <sup>5</sup>He asked them, “How many loaves do you have?” They said, “Seven.” <sup>6</sup>Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he took the seven loaves, and after giving thanks he broke them and gave them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. <sup>7</sup>They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed. <sup>8</sup>They ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over, seven baskets full. <sup>9</sup>Now there were about four thousand people. And he sent them away. <sup>10</sup>And immediately he got into the boat with his disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha.



**Sermon: “Room at the Table”**

If I ask you to name the great miracles of Jesus, what are the first ones that come to mind? Turning water into wine? Healing the Hemorrhaging woman? Raising Lazarus from the dead? These are certainly among Jesus’ greatest hits. But one of my favorites is the “Feeding of the 5000.” With just five loaves and two fish, Jesus feeds a crowd of 5,000 people with baskets and baskets of leftovers to spare. And that story, is one of the very few that is recorded in all four gospels. However, the story we have read today was *not* that one. It is certainly a similar sounding story, but in Mark’s gospel, the feeding of the 5000 takes place two chapters earlier. In this story, the crowd only numbered 4000, and there are seven loaves of bread and while there are also fish, we’re not told how many. And it can’t just be Mark’s faulty memory because Matthew remembers this second story, too. So, one of the greatest of Jesus’ miracles is one that, according to Matthew and Mark, actually happened at least twice.

So why the repeat? Was this just something that Jesus happened to do a lot? Is it just a matter of good reporting on Mark’s part, showing that Jesus did this sort of thing more than once? Or, do each of the stories say something a little different about Jesus? Does Mark tell this second mass feeding story to reiterate what he’s already said about Jesus, or to say something new?

Well, Mark has already shown that Jesus has the power and the willingness to feed his followers physically as well as spiritually. Maybe he tells this second, similar story to re-emphasize the point or maybe just because it's so cool that you can't not tell it. But, if we look at the details of this story, there are a couple of things that show us why Mark might have included it in his gospel, too.

Perhaps the most interesting difference is one that would escape most modern American readers unless they were very familiar with the geography of ancient Palestine. Several scholars have pointed out that immediately prior to this incident, Mark reports that Jesus had "returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis."<sup>1</sup> This is a rather round-about way to get to where He is going, but it also means this entire journey took place within what would have been considered gentile territory.<sup>2</sup>

And some small details suggest the crowd was more gentile than Jew. William Barclay points out that the basket used to collect the left-overs in this story is different from the basket used in the first instance of Jesus feeding 5,000 in Mark 6. In that story, it's a *kophinos* which is a Jewish basket used to carry food. It was narrow at the top and wider at the bottom, sort of like a water jar. In this instance however, the basket is described as a *sphuris* which is a type of square hamper used by gentiles.<sup>3</sup>

So there seems to be an emphasis here on Jesus performing this miracle for a group primarily made up of gentiles. (For those who are unfamiliar, gentiles were any people who were not Jews.) Readers and hearers of this story in Mark's time would have noticed the movement away from a ministry exclusively to the Jews and the beginnings of a ministry that embraced gentiles as well.

In the chapter before this one, Jesus has His encounter with a Syro-Phoenician woman,<sup>4</sup> a non-Jew, who begs Jesus to cast out a demon from her daughter. Jesus replies "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She responds saying "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." And Jesus, apparently moved by her quick wit and deep faith, replies to her, "For saying that, you may go—the demon has left your daughter."

This encounter with someone who is first, a woman and second, a gentile, shows the earliest indication that the gospel will be, as Abraham was promised so many generations before, a blessing to all nations. The woman's comment that even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall on the floor, is, in the next chapter, fulfilled when seven baskets of crumbs are picked up after Jesus feeds a largely gentile crowd.

And that theme continues throughout the gospels and into the early church. Matthews's gospel concludes with Jesus' great commission telling the disciples to go out and make disciples *of all nations*.<sup>5</sup> When the Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples at Pentecost, they are empowered to speak the languages of many nations so that commission can be fulfilled.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 7:31, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Hare, Douglas R. A. *Mark*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996. 86. Print. Westminster Bible Companion.

<sup>3</sup> Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Mark*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975. 184. Print. Daily Study Bible Ser.

<sup>4</sup> Mark 7:25-30, NRSV

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 28:19, NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:1-4, NRSV

In Romans, Paul wrote of gentiles being like branches that are grafted on to the vine of the Jews, being incorporated into the covenant God made with the Israelites.<sup>7</sup> In Galatians he wrote that through Christ, the gentiles have been saved and made right with God and that because of this, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>8</sup>

So, the gospel story is one that begins as a call to Jews, but expands to an invitation open to all peoples, regardless of race or national origin. And the modern Christian church reflects that. There are Christians in every country on earth. You can read the words of Jesus translated into over 2,500 languages including Klingon. Christianity knows no national, cultural, or apparently, planetary limitations.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul describes the church as a body with Christ as its head, writing “There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, Who is above all and through all and in all.”<sup>9</sup>

Even so, though we are a people united in Christ, we are often divided by theology and worship style and scriptural interpretation. Though we are supposed to be one in Christ, you could argue that with all our denominations and traditions, we are never more divided than when we are gathered to worship God. Which is why celebrating communion together is so important.

One of the most important parts of my growing-up was dinner with my family around the table. Every night, my mother led the preparations and we children would take on small parts of the task and then when everything was ready, we would sit down together and share the meal. Schedules were rearranged to make sure everyone could be present. But it was not just the consumption of food that took place. The dinner table was where we came together as a family.

It was where my sister and I developed a relationship of mutual support. When my parents decided that dinner was time to discuss something one of us had done wrong, the other would act as defense attorney. It often irritated my parents, but it felt good having an advocate to stand with me when I was in trouble. And at the table, my sister and I discovered our corresponding food likes and dislikes. A young woman with a tender heart for animals, she did not like to eat meat and I, being a red-blooded American boy, did not like to eat vegetables. When my parents forbade us from leaving the table until our plates were clean, we would surreptitiously trade. I would eat her meat. She would eat my veggies.

It was at that table that my father would pass me biscuits by tossing them overhand. It was here that we bowed our heads and my father would say the same grace, almost every night: “Thank you Lord for supper.” And when he tried to use that grace at Thanksgiving or Christmas, my mother would intervene with a lengthy, and more appropriate to the season, addendum. It was at that table that my mother expressed her deep love through elaborate meals of fried chicken and mashed potatoes, chicken prioleau, pork chops, and macaroni and cheese, and despite my disdain for them, vegetables of every type cooked, as is the southern way, with bacon or ham.

The table was not just a place where we partook of the practical task of eating and fueling our bodies. It was the place where we listened to one another and celebrated one another. It was the place where we

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<sup>7</sup> Romans 11:16-24, NRSV

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 3:6-9, 28-29, NRSV

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 4:4-6, NRSV

shared our victories and defeats, acknowledged good grades, held family gripe sessions, solved problems, sought advice, and shared the news of our lives. It was at the table that I really came to know my family and they, me.

And as we grew older, our schedules got busier and our activities pushed later into the evenings, but we still made time for dinner around that table. My mother made sure of it. We didn't eat at different times and let each person fend for themselves. We made a point of having dinner together. Every night. Because no matter how busy we were or how much school work we had to do, there was always a time when everything took a back seat and we spent time together as a family, sitting at table, nourishing our bodies and our souls.

That's what communion is. No matter where you are from, or what language you speak, or what your race or gender or what your political or theological beliefs, when we come to the table we are coming together as Christ's body, bound together as a family of the children of God.

Yes, communion is a physical re-enactment of the Lords Supper when, on the night he was arrested, Jesus sat at table with his disciples and fellow travelers and celebrated an even older event of significance, the Passover of God.

But communion is something more. As Donald McKim writes, "In the Lords Supper we experience a fullness of time in which past, present, and future come together.

First the past: When we break the bread and drink from the cup, we remember Jesus' words to "do so in remembrance of me." In celebrating communion, we remember Jesus' life, death and resurrection and that through them, we have been reconciled to God; that the relationship with God, that humans messed up, has been made right.

Second, the present: Jesus says "this cup is a new covenant. When we take communion, we celebrate that God has made a covenant with us; that all of God's promises throughout the Old Testament have been fulfilled in Jesus and that in Him we, who are not of the line of Abraham, are welcomed into God's family too.

And finally, the future: In the Lord's Supper "we proclaim the saving death of our risen Lord *until He comes again*." As we eat the bread and drink the cup, we remember the Christ who is represented in those gifts and we recall the promise that He will one day come again at the completion of God's Kingdom. As we eat this meal, we do so looking forward to the day when all of God's children will gather together; when, as the gospel writer Luke said, they "will come from east and west, from north and south," to sit together at table in the Kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup>

At its heart, communion is a meal and it is a time when we come together to not just partake of that meal, but to celebrate the God who calls all of God's people to the table as a family and who, through Christ, feeds and nourishes our souls. When we eat the bread and drink of the fruit of the vine, we do so not as individuals or members of any group; we do so not as protestants, or Presbyterians, but as members of God's family; we do so recognizing that the people next to us in the pew or behind us in the intinction line are just as much sinners as we are, and that they are just as much children of God as we

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<sup>10</sup> McKim, Donald K. *Presbyterian Questions, Presbyterian Answers: Exploring Christian Faith*. Louisville, KY: Geneva, 2003. 83-84. Print.

are too. As we eat and drink we do so recognizing our connections with God and all of God's people everywhere in the world.

Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. On this day, Christians all over the world will gather to worship God and to celebrate the Lord's Supper. As we take the communion elements, we will do so knowing that hundreds of thousands if not millions of Christians all over the world are doing the same thing today. Christians in places like Ghana, and Korea, and Sri Lanka, and Niger will celebrate the Lord's Supper with us and we, with them. And while we are not gathered physically together in one space, in a very real sense we are all gathered at table in the presence of God.

Reverend Donald Kerr, a Presbyterian pastor and the son of the man who began World Communion Sunday has said this about its observance:

"When we all share the Meal where Christ is our Host, we are connected in ways that go beyond our personal preferences, or theological scuffles, as well as transcending boundaries of geography and language. What we find on World Communion Sunday is a dissolving of those things that might hurt or divide us. Around His Table together, we broadcast our faith to the world and say, "Come and dine; there is room for all!"<sup>11</sup>

As we gather around this table, we remember that no matter how small it is, there is still room: for saints and sinners, for those who hunger and those who are satisfied, for the comfortable and the afflicted, for those we know and love, and for the stranger, as well as the ones we fear and despise.

There is room enough for everyone.

So scootch over; pull up another chair, then go out, and tell all the world to come in. There's room enough for all to come and be filled at the table of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Dalles, John A. "Presbyterian Origins - World Wide Communion Sunday." *WekiviaPresbyterian.Org*. Wekivia Presbyterian Church, n.d. Web. 05 Oct. 2015.

<[http://www.wekivapresbyterian.org/articles/presbyterian\\_origins.htm](http://www.wekivapresbyterian.org/articles/presbyterian_origins.htm)>.

<sup>12</sup> Williamson, Bobby. *Room at the Table*. Bobby Williamson. 2002. Montreal Youth Conference Theme Song.