

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“You Give Them Something To Eat”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, October 6, 2019

Romans 14:13-23

Let us therefore no longer pass judgement on one another; but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Luke 19:10-17

As they were listening to this, he went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. So he said, ‘A nobleman went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, “Do business with these until I come back.” But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, “We do not want this man to rule over us.” When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading. The first came forward and said, “Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds.” He said to him, “Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities.”

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take whatever it is within us that has our attention, pray that you would take the words we hear in Scripture, the words we offer in song and in prayer, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Take all of this, touch, bless, break, and transform it into the living word of Jesus Christ. And let that word do its ministry within us and through us. Let it guide us and challenge us. Let it be our courage, our strength, our sight, our words, and our actions. That we might be a people full of mercy, and grace, and peace. A people filled with love and charity and welcome. We ask this in Christ's faithful name. Amen.

We celebrate, as I said to the children, World Communion Sunday, which was originally called Worldwide Communion Sunday when it was started in 1930 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the idea of the pastor of Shady Side Presbyterian Church. For many years, it was just a small movement. One Sunday a year, the local churches, or those who had heard about it, would dedicate through one service, a communion service honoring or recognizing the connections that we have with our sisters and brothers around the globe. The movement, as I said, started slowly, but then as World War II began to rage, the movement took off. And what is now called the World Council of Churches promoted the movement, and it spread to all the corners of the earth. So that this day in faraway places, like a ministry in Africa, where they've stopped to dedicate a well, they will gather for communion, to break bread and to share the cup. They will gather in mega churches in Korea, they will gather in house churches in China, they will gather in small communities in the Middle East, where they still have have to hide and be protective of one another in order to share the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

And we will gather this day around this table, taking a piece of bread and dipping it into a cup. Christ says, "This is my body broken for you. Take and eat. This cup is a sign of a new covenant, my blood shed for you, for the forgiveness of your sin, take and drink." And we do all of this in remembrance of Christ. In remembrance of the one who sent out the 12 disciples and said, "Go into the villages, forgive sins, heal the sick, don't take anything with you, nothing to eat. Don't take sets pairs of clothes, just

one. Go and do your ministry." And they went out and they did amazing things. And then as it says here in Luke, on their return, the apostles told Jesus all that they had done. I can imagine the 12 of them coming back to Jesus, talking about all the sick people that they had cured, all the demons that they had cast out, all the people who they had told the message of Christ to and who began to believe. And they were just full of themselves with joy at what had happened. They probably had some harrowing stories of rejection, of people who did not welcome them. Maybe there was a demon or two who was too stubborn, a sickness that claimed life rather than being cured. But they came back and told Jesus all about what they had done. And Jesus hears them and thinks, "Okay, yeah, sure. Good job." And then as the day draws to a close, the disciples tell Jesus after his teaching, and welcoming, and healing, and talking about the kingdom, "Hey, send all these people away because they're getting hungry, and it's getting late, and we're out here in the middle of nowhere." And Jesus says to them, "You give them something to eat."

Part of me thinks that Jesus telling them, "You give them something to eat", is him deflating their egos. Because they had gone out for the first time in the name of Christ and done amazing things. Things that they didn't expect that they would do. And upon their return, gathering together, they're sharing stories and, "Oh, wow, you did that? Oh, I did this. So you did that. I did this. You got one demon to go away? Well, I had one person that had three demons, and all three of them left." "Oh, yeah? Well, I had a whole family that had demons and I cast them all out." And they started to outdo one another, in their faith and in their works. And Jesus said to them, "Oh, yeah, you're so special? Then you give all of these people something to eat." And he caught them up short. And they looked at each other, looked at all the people, looked at him and said, "We've only got this. Five loaves and two fish." And as the story goes here, and then every other gospel, what is often called the first miracle of Christ, he takes what they have given him, he blesses it, breaks it gives thanks and gives it to the disciples and they distribute it to the crowds. And we know famously that all of them ate. All of them were filled and 12 baskets, representing the 12 tribes of Israel, were filled with broken pieces of what was leftover. You give them something to eat.

I remember in seminary sitting with a classmate who had been struggling-- you can see in class that he is struggling with his sense of call and what he should do. And I happened to be able to sit with him one day over lunch, and we were talking and I just asked, because that's kind of what I do. I just said, "Something seems to be eating at you. What is it?" And he said to me, this isn't a direct quote, but what he said was essentially, "I got to be honest. I feel like a fraud I'm here at Princeton Seminary. I never thought I'd get in. And I'm only a couple of years away from being ordained. I'm in my second marriage. I don't know what people are going to think about that. I began to say it doesn't really matter, you're here. That's what matters. God's at work in your life. There's grace. I was still a little naive on this journey as well. And then he shared with me that he had been arrested just after college for stealing something and he wondered if the church that he was going to be called to would do a background check on him, like is required, and find out that he had been arrested. And I said, "Well, You know, it wasn't the worst of crimes. I'm sure you could just tell them on the front end and it wouldn't be a surprise and talk about how God is at work in your life and still called you. And he kept going on and on and on about how "I don't know about this" and he was just being consumed from the inside out and just wrapping himself in this tighter and tighter ball. And then I can remember asking him, "Have you read about Paul in the New Testament? You're the guy who stood by when Stephen was killed? The God's still called and said 'Go' and he went and the church was born in places far and wide? Have you read anything about the Old Testament and some of those scoundrels?" And as I kept talking, something seemed to sort of catch hold with him. And he thanked me and off we went. And I can remember seeing him again at graduation and we had seen each other in between. But at graduation, he came up to me, he looked me in the eye and alls he said was, "Thank you". And I understood what he meant and he knew which conversation we were talking about. Because I had shared with him some of my failings and I'm sure over the years he had a chance to hear from other classmates about their problems. How they had fallen short in the eyes of God and yet all of us were called to serve in the church.

It never dawned on me to think about Jesus and the power of that to minister to someone who's not sure if they're up to something. Whether it be a call to go into ministry, to serve as an elder., to go and volunteer at a food pantry. Whatever it is. "You give them something to eat", Jesus says. And with those words, the ministry of Jesus is shared through those who are inadequately prepared and ill-equipped according to the world. Because five loads and two fish will never feed five thousand people. It never dawned on me to think about ourselves as that bread that is broken open. The body of Christ. And that it is in our brokenness that we are able to feed others. So much so that the brokenness is gathered together and there's 12 baskets full of it. Whatever it is, just as I had preached about how important it is for us to be those who are lost and allow God to do the finding, it is important for us to be broke or broken and realize that it is in that brokenness that God ministers through us to others.

One of the things that I was advised to do early on in my ministry was to have good mentors, some of whom were alive and others who I would never meet but would read their books. And one of those mentors is Parker Palmer, someone who I have

looked up to through books called *Hidden Wholeness* and *The Promise of Paradox*. He's written these books and he's written the book *On the Brink of Everything* that we're going to do a book group on later this month. And he is someone who understands the power of ministering from brokenness because Parker Palmer suffers from severe depression. And it is through that breaking of ego and assurance and feeling great all the time that he is able to communicate in a way that touches people's lives. And I just learned in the last two weeks that Parker Palmer and I have a common mentor, a hero if you will, in the faith, Thomas Merton. Palmer read Merton during graduate school and then continued reading Merton for years and years and Merton introduced the ideas that Palmer has written about.

Thomas Merton wrote, "There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness, the mysterious unity and integrity that is wisdom, the mother of all." One of Palmer's book is *A Hidden Wholeness*. And then, Merton wrote, "I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly, not of a whale, but of a paradox." And Palmer wrote his first book, *The Promise of Paradox*, where rather than thinking that I'm better than you or you're better than me, rather than making distinctions--paradoxes, both things can be true even though they seem to be opposite. Paradox and a hidden wholeness or an invisible richness, these were Merton's ideas that he introduced into the world through his writing and speaking. Parker Palmer has picked them up and carried them forward, expanded them, allowed people who've read his books to be blessed by his reflections on these ideas that in brokenness, God's richness comes to us and is revealed in us and that we can share out of that brokenness and we can feed other people by being honest and open, by sharing the truth of our lives, by simply being real and not living lives, again, as Merton said, "Of self impersonation." So I've been wondering, what does this meal that we're about to share, how does it capture paradox and hidden wholeness? In Isaiah, the 55th chapter, the prophet says that, "Hey, everyone who thirsts, come to the water. And you that have no money, come buy, eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price. Eat rich food. Be satisfied." A paradox, how can someone with no money come and eat and buy wine and milk and rich food? And then in Corinthians, we have the words that we'll hear again soon. "This is my body, broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me." What does it look like to live life as a paradox and to believe in a hidden wholeness? It looks like us coming to this table and taking a piece of bread and sharing communion with each other and with our sisters and brothers around the world.

But I think a real-world application was also visible of what it means to live a paradox and to trust in the hidden wholeness. And it comes out of the newspapers, out of the headlines of not too long ago. Because there was a trial of a white police officer in Dallas, Texas, who, one night, had gone into an apartment thinking it was her own, encountered an unarmed black man who she thought was an intruder, pulled out her service revolver and shot him and killed him. Her name was Amber Guyger. It fueled all the stories that we have heard, especially here in St. Louis that we are all too familiar with, white police officer kills unarmed black man. They had a trial, and to the surprise of some, she was found guilty of murder. And then during the sentencing phase, as the jury was going to deliberate on how long she should spend in prison, the man she killed, Botham Jean, his brother, 18 years old, named Brent, got up and asked that she be forgiven and that the sentence be as light as possible. The prosecutors had asked for 28 years because that was how old Botham Jean would've been on his next birthday had he still been alive. The jurors went into the room to deliberate and the story that comes from a couple of them, is that the jury was talking about the range of time from a minimum amount of time to 99 years and that the prosecutors encouragement of 28 years seemed to be out of character with what Botham Jean would've wanted. Because the Jean family are Christians and they have professed all along forgiveness for what she has done. So for just over an hour, the jury deliberated and decided that 10 years was the right amount of time. At her sentencing hearing, Botham Jean's brother talked again. And as he concluded his remarks, he asked the judge, "Your honor, may I have permission to hug her?" And he did. He hugged her. He forgave her.

And the commentary since then has been split. Some people say that it is typical of the black community to forgive too soon. Other people are saying, "Isn't it great because this is a manifestation of their Christian belief?" I stand before you, not sure which way I think about it at all. But what I do recognize is that out of brokenness and the paradox of yet again a white police officer killing an unarmed black man that there is power in forgiveness. There is power in brokenness. There is power in paradox. So let us all trust that as we share communion this day and let us remember that in our brokenness, like Christ, we can minister to others. Amen.