# *Sacraments of Hope*

August 20, 2006 (Propoer 15, Year B)

Proverbs 9:1-6 Psalm 147 John 6:51-58

*I come with Christians far and near*
*to find, as all are fed,*
*the new community of love*
*in Christ's communion bread.*

*As Christ breaks bread and bids us share,*
*each proud division ends.*
*That love that made us makes us one,*
*and strangers now are friends.*[1]

There is no last supper in the gospel of John. There is no last supper, no institution of the eucharist just before Jesus' arrest. There is instead **this**, this rich and complex sixth chapter which begins with the feeding of the 5,000 – the great miracle of God's abundance, the great miracle of the disciples learning to become church -- and concludes with Jesus' promise of himself as the Bread of Life, a teaching so shocking and graphic that, as we'll see next week, many people turned away, stopped following this rambling rabbi.

It's a very different story than the story in the synoptic gospels – Mathew, Mark, and Luke. In John's gospel, the sacrament of the eucharist isn't an afterthought or an inheritance. The sacrament of the eucharist is tied right up in the middle of Jesus' proclamation of justice, of the coming of the reign of God. John's Gospel is the one that links the mystery of Christ's body and blood, with the kingdom news, the Good news, of the feeding of the 5000, the feeding of the hungry.

I grew up at Saint James' Cathedral, Chicago: high church, smells and bells, hand-stenciled walls, marble floors… I was convinced that if I stepped past the altar rail into the marble-lined chancel before I was an acolyte, there would be an earthquake, the stone would open and swallow me up!

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence,*
*and with fear and trembling stand*
*ponder nothing earthly minded,*
*for with blessing in his hand*
*Christ our God to earth descendeth,*
*our full homage to demand.*[2]

For 1700 years, Christians have sung that hymn the awe and the mystery that it calls us to, the power of the sacrament of Christ's body and blood. The sacraments, we are taught, *are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace.*

Baptism and the eucharist are the two great sacraments; confirmation, ordination, holy matrimony, reconciliation of a penitent, and unction are the other five sacramental rites we list. But God is not limited to these rites – as our bcp tells us, "God is not limited to these rites – they are patterns of countless ways by which God uses material things to reach out to us."

It sounds suspiciously to me as though our Anglican tradition claims that there are not only 2 great sacraments and 5 minor sacraments, but that there are countless, ***countless*** sacraments through which God reaches out to us. The warm greeting from a friend, a stranger holding a door for you,

[1] "I Come with Joy," words by Brian Wren, © 1971 by Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL. Hymnal 1982, #304.

[2] "Let all Mortal Flesh Keep Silence" Words: Liturgy of Saint James (fifth century); trans. Gerald Moultrie (1829-1885), 1864; Hymnal 1982, #324


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a blessing of rain on a parched garden and the thankfulness that blooms in our heart in that moment.

The author of the Gospel of Matthew has Jesus describe a whole series of sacraments:
*"Come, you that are blessed by my Father,*
*inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world;*
*for I was hungry and you gave me food,*
*I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink,*
*I was a stranger and you welcomed me,*
*I was naked and you gave me clothing,*
*I was sick and you took care of me,*
*I was in prison and you visited me.*[3]

These too, these too, are sacraments. Feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, caring for the sick - ways by which God uses material things to reach out to us, by which we find ourselves reaching out to God.

We're starting a new thing here at Messiah (though if you've been here for a few years, you'll realize that we're also re-starting an old thing). Beginning next Sunday, we'll be collecting for the Newton Food Pantry. We'll collect canned food, non-perishable food like pasta, as well as personal items that food stamps don't cover – like toothpaste and soap.

It's hard to be hungry and live in the suburbs; out here you're even more invisible than in the city – the suburbs like to pretend that hunger is an *Boston* problem. But hunger, hunger is a ***human*** problem, and there are 83,000 people in this city of Newton, and not a few of them are between jobs, or having to choose between rent and groceries.

In the face of that truth, our sacraments can't stop at the church door. Messiah honors the richness our sacramental practices – the sung service, the clouds of incense on high holy days, the vigil on Maundy Thursday… And every Sunday we honor the mystery of what the sacrament creates – the body of Christ -- when we gather around in a circle, around this holy table, and ourselves become the body of Christ.

Taking part in the food bank is one way that we extend these sacraments beyond the church door. *Sacraments*, our prayer book tells us, *sustain our present hope and anticipate its future fulfillment.*

To be baptized is to be welcomed into the community of hope. To receive communion is to take part in this body of hope. To feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, is to bring God's hope into the world.

I hope you'll join me in bringing God's hope to the world by taking part in collecting food for the food bank. We'll collect the food by the front door, by the prayer corner, and bring it up along with all the other offertory gifts, much as the early church would have done 2000 years ago, offering up our gifts at the Eucharistic feast [4]

There are countless sacraments around us – not just surrounded by marble floors and railings, but next time you pick up a can of tuna from the grocery story or an extra box of pasta, listen for the chorus of seraphim, check if you can smell the incense, because you may taking part in the sacramental life of God.

[3] Matthew 25:34-37

[4] Thanks to Phyllis and Sheila, for spearheading this, to Daryl for doing some of the first research, and to everyone who took part in that discussion months ago about social justice at Messiah; the food bank is one first step to living out our hope for who we want to be as a Christian community.


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