

Deuteronomy 8:1-3 and Matthew 26:17-29

“Jesus, the Bread of the World”

When we were serving as missionaries in Southern Italy, the bread in Naples was famous as being the best bread in the region. Since we lived on the outskirts of Naples, when we would leave the orphanage where we lived on communion Sundays we would stop at the only place that was open on Sunday morning to get bread, which were this open air stands with a young teenage boy selling hot bread from a bicycle basket. We would get one loaf for the church in Salerno, one for the church in Albanella, one for the family in Ravello whom we would visit every other week, and a fourth for us as we travelled to all these places. I have never tasted better bread in my life.

Is there anything more basic in life than bread? Now, in an industrialized country we miss out on the real importance of bread and the role that it serves in other countries. When we would come to a place in Russia that we hadn't seen before and people were there to greet us they would formally greet us with bread and salt, as a sign and symbol of the basic law of hospitality that is supposed to cut across cultures and countries. When we buy our bread rarely do we go to a baker, or get it hot out of the oven sold on the streets or even in a store. It is wrapped in plastic normally.

In Scripture we see the role that bread plays in both the Old and the New Testament. Just to name a few remember the manna that fell from heaven, which wasn't technically bread, but was called bread from heaven. That image is used as an example of the way in which God nurtures us, even as we know that men and women do not live by bread alone, but as our Deuteronomy Scriptures state: but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. We see bread in Jesus' temptation with Satan encouraging him to turn the rock into a loaf, and Jesus' response is exactly these verses, describing how the basic needs met by bread physically, cannot meet the spiritual needs that we all have in being nurtured by God.

Today, both of our Scriptures speak of bread being much more than the physical deliciousness of a Neopolitan baked bread, but also the metaphor and example for God nurturing us and sustaining us in the most basic way possible, as we look to be in relationship with him. Today we get what are called the Words of Institution. Jesus institutes, he establishes, begins for the very first time, this sacrament that we call communion, or the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist. It is in our reading today that we find the establishing of the Lord's Supper and we

see the beginning of the historical and spiritual grounding to what we will be doing together as people of the church. Let's read.

READ

This is my body...we pick up our reading in chapter 26 with Jesus and his disciples four days after he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, on a Thursday morning or afternoon, getting ready for what would be the final Passover meal that Jesus would have with his disciples.

Passover is also called the Festival of Unleavened bread. It is arguably one of the most important religious holidays in the Jewish calendar. In Jesus' day all Jews had to go to Jerusalem for Passover, so you can imagine the chaos and the fact that Jesus had already arranged a room to eat this traditional meal was probably a huge relief for his disciples. Passover itself is about 7 or 8 days as a religious holiday, and during that time you would have a seder meal which was completely scripted. There would be unleavened bread, matzah, and wine, and lamb, and bitter herbs, and salt water, and in the end it was a really good meal because over time a lot was added to it.

But it was a religious meal and the purpose of the meal was for those participating in it to remember that God had delivered the Israelites from slavery out of Egypt in such a rush that the bread had to be taken unleavened, flat, and so that was the bread that was eaten at this meal. So our Scripture begins with Jesus being in charge and telling his disciples where to go in order to find the room already ready and to prepare the meal for when he gets there. The preparations are made, some Gospels call that room a room on the upper floor, or the Upper Room. That's where we get the notion of an upper room, Matthew doesn't mention that but Luke does.

We read in vs.20 that Jesus takes his place with his disciples while they are eating. He was the rabbi, so it was his turn now to say the script, to describe how this meal fit neatly into the looking back to God delivering his people, and looking forward to how God would one day deliver his people, and boy were they looking forward to being delivered from the heavy hand of the Romans. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus is the one who would do that since some thought he was the Messiah, and that was the primary role of the Messiah. But this Passover was going to be unlike any other Passover that they had experienced before.

But instead he drops a bomb on them that was totally unexpected. One of you here, one of you twelve, my closest followers, will betray me. The Scripture states that one by one, each disciple goes up to Jesus and asks him, almost as if they were in a line, I'm not the one, am I. It

was stated in a way that almost demanded a negative answer. Jesus gives some cryptic answer that the one who shares his bread and dipped his hand in the bowl with him would betray him, but they all did that. They didn't realize then that they would all abandon Jesus, not just Judas, but Peter by denying him and the other by running away and leaving him abandoned to the authorities to be tortured and killed.

On the heels of this bomb that he drops at the meal, he then takes a piece of bread and there is probably a sigh of relief that rises in the room, finally Jesus is going to stick to the script. This is the part where the father during the meal takes the bread and breaks it and gives it to us and explains that this bread signifies the liberation from slavery and how we will be liberated as well. They had heard it before growing up as kids. This was the third time that they had celebrated Passover with Jesus, and he had followed the script all the other times, there is no reason to think he wouldn't follow it now. Finally some normalcy after all this crazy talk of betrayal.

This is my body. Look at vs. 26. Take eat, this is my body. This is not part of the script. These are the words of institution, and after the first bomb dropped in the betrayal discussion, now we have Jesus telling his disciples that this bread that they have in their hand is the body of Jesus. Matthew at least gives us the more tame version compared to John in chapter 6 where he states: I am the bread of life, I am the living bread, and then he tells his disciples in the Gospel of John in that same breath: the bread that I will give to the world is my flesh. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life. It should remind us this Advent Season of the greatest birth narrative in the Bible which is in John when we read and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Our focus today is trying to understand what Jesus means here for his disciples and for us when he says this is my body, and that he gave the world his flesh. We find that answer in Matthew 26 in these words of institution, but also in the Lord's Supper as the center of our Christian faith and worship. These words before us have established not just the Lord's Supper but also the liturgy and the ritual that would follow for millenia. That's exciting for me to think that what we do around this table has been done by believers for over 2,000 years. This liturgy which is found within the midst of a Passover seder, Jesus takes and shapes and forms for his own purposes, for our purpose as well.

He gives completely different meaning to the bread in his hand and that passed to the disciples. It is no longer ascribed to the Exodus, but rather he says, this is my body. We know that by means of his imminent death a new exodus, a new deliverance would occur. Jesus is showing that a greater deliverance than Exodus was going to take place in his death and his resurrection for all of humanity.

In the bread and the wine, he gives meaning to the very center of the Christian faith. The Lord's Supper is central to Christian worship with John Calvin telling us that it should be administered every time that the Word of God is preached. This is our Passover meal together, brothers and sisters in Christ. When we celebrate we look back briefly, but we especially look forward to what we have been seeing over these past few months. Jesus is coming back, we look forward to that in this our Passover feast of the Lord's Supper. As Jesus told his disciples, his time has come.

Now, while we believe in a real spiritual presence, of Jesus in communion, we don't see and believe in a physical presence found within these elements. The last Supper is a sacrament of the real spiritual presence, but also of real physical absence since it reminds us that Jesus was forcefully removed from our midst. His body broken, his blood shed, for the singular purpose of what we read in vs.28, for the forgiveness of sins.

We can't understand what it means for Jesus to be the bread of the world for us without knowing Isaiah 53. This is Advent, but we are looking at Lent in Advent because we can't understand the importance of the word becoming flesh, of Jesus being born in a manger, if we don't understand the life that he lived and the life that he wants us to live. Listen to this life that he sets before us by living it first himself.

We are called to participate in the bread of life and the body of Jesus. There is a fine line between commitment and betrayal. We must always be asking that question that the disciples asked Jesus, it isn't me, is it? But notice that they often crossed that line and betrayed Jesus, not willing to drink the cup that he had to drink. Not willing to sacrifice of their own bodies and their own livelihood for the sake of being faithful to Christ. Sharing in Jesus' bread means sharing in his death. Jesus has the power to forgive sins, and this sacrament is a manifestation of that.

Jesus said my time is near, it is at hand. As we continue our journey through Advent, let's not forget the sacrifices of Lent that we see in Jesus' life, and which are required by us as well. Amen.