

“Practicing Radical Hospitality”

Exodus 16:2-4, John 6:24-35

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Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never go hungry and whoever believes in me never will be thirsty.” A little later during our service, we are going to take communion and receive bread and wine. What does it mean that Jesus is ‘the bread of life’? Why did Jesus define himself as the bread, not as the Great Moses or King David? Even though we take communion once per month, we never have a chance to understand the meaning of communion. This morning, I would like to talk about communion to learn what it means “Jesus Christ, ‘the real and true bread’”.

Last Sunday after service, Steven who used to be an orthodox Jew, but now he has become a Christian, gave me clarification of the fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity: Christianity believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, but Judaism is still waiting for the Messiah.

There are many different churches around us like Unitarian, Christian Science, Scientologist or Mormon churches around us. How can we tell the difference between Christian churches and others? The principle is simple. The Christian church is Jesus Christ-focused, a faith community for our spiritual life journey. One common Christian ritual is communion no matter the church. Many churches take communion every Sunday, but our denomination, United Methodist Church takes communion once per month. Communion helps us to affirm our faith. What is the essence of communion?

Our first reading in Exodus, shows us an inspirational point about our compassionate God. The Israelites were let out of Egyptian slavery by Moses’ leadership. But the reality was not sweet. They had to deal with more troubles and difficulties: They were hungry and anxious about an uncertain future. Most of all, they had a lack of faith in God. The Israelites had same challenges like ours. A psychologist, Abraham Maslow reminds us in his famous book, *The Organism* that there is a **hierarchy of needs** in our human life. He introduces the five stages of the human life using a pyramid diagram. The first is *physiological need*, simply speaking, the need for food, water and to avoid pain and to find a place to sleep for survival as a human being. The next stages are *safety and security needs*, *the love and belonging needs* and *the self-esteem needs*. The final stage is to accomplish *the need of ‘self-actualization’*.

The Israelites were struggling with basic physical needs. For fifteen days, they hadn't had anything to eat. God was watching over his people. But they forgot that God liberated them from four hundred years of slavery. Instead, they started complaining to Moses saying "We were happy in the land of Egypt, even though we were in slavery, because we were able to eat our fill of bread. Now you brought us out in this wilderness to kill all of us with hunger? (v.3)", but God didn't blame their impatience. Rather, God heard their desperate voices, and provided enough bread from heaven to satisfy their basic physical needs. The bread is called *Manna* which means, "What is it?" The Israelites wondered about this special gift, but God has prepared this gift for them unexpectedly with grace. Our God is always gracious and compassionate rather than scolding and punishing. God cares and provides what we want in times of need through angels like Moses to the Israelites in the wilderness.

Our second reading, in the Gospel of John makes a connection between the event of Manna in the wilderness and Jesus Christ as the true and real bread for us. In a previous chapter, Jesus performed a miracle to feed five thousand people with five breads and two fish. The Bible states, "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness. Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat." Many followers identified Jesus as Moses in the Old Testament. It is interesting to see that people compared Jesus with Moses. Moses is a very important leader in Jewish tradition. Jewish people anticipate the Messiah like either the image of Moses or King David. One of members, *Jesus seminar* (Scholars who tried to identify Jesus' real words in the Bible), John Dominic Crossan argues that the Gospel of Matthew intentionally compares Jesus' birth story with Moses. For example, the escape story to Egypt ('flight to Egypt') when Jesus was a baby, it resembles Moses' birth story. The Gospel of Matthew starts with Jesus' genealogy even though his physical birth has nothing to do with King David. It is simply important to be in connection with Moses and King David. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is described as the Messiah who is the greater than Moses and King David. But Jesus surprised people with a new and provocative idea about himself. Jesus said that he came to be the bread of life, the real bread for people.

Every time we take communion, we receive the bread and wine as the body and the blood of Jesus. When we break the bread in the communion, it reminds us that Jesus' body is broken for the bread of life for us. The bread means meal to feed the hungry. It can be meatloaf and mashed potatoes, a bowl of soup or steamed rice to give us energy and protein for those who tried to satisfy the physiological needs. But people didn't know that. Jesus was aware that when he performed a miracle to feed five thousand people, people followed him not

because they saw God in Jesus Christ, but because Jesus fed them, filled their stomachs for free. Jesus didn't want to be a great hero like Moses, not as Great God who provided good enough food, but he humbled down and came to us as the 'real bread' for the physiological needs and spiritual needs for our lives.

Let me briefly share different views on the understanding of the bread and wine among Christian churches. The Roman Catholic Church believes a unique theology on communion: The doctrine of 'Transubstantiation' which means the substance of wheat bread and grape wine changes into the substance of the body and the blood of Jesus Christ. It originates from the philosopher Aristotle's philosophy. Substance here means what something is in itself: not materials, size nor shape, nor anything else perceptible to the senses. The concept of substance is hard to understand and experience by our five senses without your faith. For example, do you think that there is substance on justice, love or heaven? Or does it vary depending on your own situation?

The Eastern Orthodox churches share the Roman Catholic's perspective but they prefer to define communion as 'divine mystery'. Our Methodist, Episcopal and Lutheran churches often define communion as 'God's real presence'. Even though there are some different theological perspectives on the meaning of the bread and the wine during communion, there is a common belief among us. The bread and the grape juice mean the body and his blood of Jesus Christ given and poured out for salvation of our lives. Every time when we take the bread, we experience God's real presence and accept Jesus Christ as the bread of life for us, given as an energy source, empowerment as "self esteem", and "self-actualization".

I want to emphasize this point: **Communion is not merely a ritual that we just repeat once per month. It is a profound challenge but an extended invitation to join a new life in Jesus Christ. Christ invites us to follow him to be a bread of life for others.** Usually, we encourage our congregation to give their offering in the narthex as they come to worship. But we ask you a special offering on every Communion Sunday, which provides for the pastor's discretionary fund. We use this special offering to help out families in our congregation and go beyond our church for reaching our neighborhood to help the needy. In the last two weeks, six families came and asked for some financial help. A couple of families showed me their eviction notice for their apartment rent and overdue bills. They had a month old baby with two little children. They told me that there are no more available shelters for them in Sacramento, then where do they go for tonight if they are forced to be out on the street? Due to a limited fund, we couldn't pay the whole rent and other bills, but I helped some of them. Your offering is the bread of life for a time of their need.

When we take communion, we are reminded of Jesus' radical hospitality for us as he shared his life for us. Church is commissioned here to share more 'bread of life' with our neighborhood as an accountable community to our neighborhood. Practicing our small hospitality is to exercise our Christian faith. This is the heart of God and the Spirit of Jesus' ministry. Let us continue to practice our faith through our actions. Amen.