

Companions: The Mark of Community

Scripture: John 21:9-14

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Spring Lake, Michigan
June 30, 2002

Transcription of the spoken sermon

At the invitation of Jesus, "Come and have breakfast," the disciples gather around him for a breakfast of bread and fish on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. That story is in the 21st chapter of John, which we are told is an addendum to the Gospel that was the last to be written. Those who study the scriptures tell us this addendum was probably about the issue of leadership in the early Church between Peter and the beloved disciple. However that may be, it is also felt that this addendum to the latest Gospel reflects some very early Galilean tradition. Jesus is purported to meet the disciples after the resurrection in Galilee, but there is no other account of a meal with the disciples than this, and this seems to be rather awkwardly melded together with the appearance to Peter, a fishing story. But I'm not really interested this morning at analysis of the passage from that critical standpoint, but rather to see in the midst of that chapter this delightful picture of Jesus on the seashore having prepared breakfast for that group of his disciples, inviting them, "Come and have breakfast," and in the midst of that breakfast meal, they recognize him.

As he stood on the seashore and asked them how they had done during the night, they had to say it had been a fruitless night. So he gave them one more instruction, one more cast, and they had this miraculous catch of fish, and they had a sense, could it be? Was it really he? But, they dared not ask. However, in the breaking of bread and the sharing of a meal, their eyes were opened and they knew it was the presence of the risen one. Very much like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, joined by the third, didn't know who he was until they sat at table and he broke bread and their eyes were opened and their hearts burned within them, and they said, "It's the Lord." They experienced the presence of the crucified one and their exclamation, their profession of faith was that the story is not ended, he lives. Jesus lives.

And so, we have in this little scene the evocation of the hints of the Eucharist feast that was to become the central sacramental act of the Christian Church. This is not surprising, because Jesus was always breaking bread. Jesus was always at table with someone. In fact, we're told that the open table was the very mark of Jesus' ministry, a table that was open to all, that excluded none, a table where so

many wonderful things happen in this life. Where there was breakfast or lunch or dinner, it seemed that he did his best work, gathered his community and nurtured that community around the table breaking bread. On the night in which he was betrayed, he gathered with his disciples, whether in an official Passover supper or not, it was, indeed, a momentous last supper.

And so, it is not surprising that they had gone back to Galilee, Peter for example. What do you do when you are afraid? When you are disappointed? When you are confused? You go back home. And Peter went back fishing, for what do you do when your world falls apart? You reach out for that which is familiar and you return to the routine. And then, in that setting, in Galilee, after fishing all night, a seaside breakfast and their eyes are opened and they recognize him.

Early Christian iconography indicates that the meal of bread and fish was more predominant than the meal of bread and wine. And so, here we have in John's addendum this 21st chapter, a little scene, a breakfast scene of bread and fish which was the place of recognition where their eyes were opened and that translated then into the life of the church into what we have just experienced. It is a shared meal ritualized, to be sure, routinized, to be sure, how else can we do it in an assembly like this? But, the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist has been that central sacramental act in which we have recognized the presence of the Lord.

In the history of the Church, that meal became the chief means of explaining the meaning of the death of Christ. We know that history. If you happen to be from a Roman Catholic background, the word transubstantiation may ring a bell with you, for the priest duly ordained has an indelible grace by which he is able to perform the miracle at the table, changing the bread into the body and the wine into the blood. Well, at the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, Martin Luther said, "No, I don't think so. Rather, the word is consubstantiation. Not substance transposed into another, but a substance now surrounding the bread and the cup, over and above and around." And John Calvin said, "Well, Martin Luther, not really. How about through the Holy Spirit? Spiritual partaking of the bread and the cup." And then, of course, there is the Free Church tradition. Those in the sacramental tradition sort of look down their noses at the Free Church, saying, "Well, they have only empty signs, you know. It's just simply a memorial feast."

Well, you can see what the Church has done in its splitting of hairs, so to speak, in trying to understand what actually happens in that supper. But, the main central meaning of the church's explanation was that, somehow or other, that supper was a representation of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ whereby our sin was removed and we were reconciled to God. That is the tradition, and that is where most of us began, at least, in experiencing the supper, and for many of you, I suppose, the partaking even this morning would mean "I am forgiven, I have peace with God," and that is wonderful and beautiful, and I don't want to take that away. But, I do want to suggest even another possibility alongside of that. I don't think it is a new

insight. I think it may well reflect the very earliest experience of those disciples and that early Jesus community. For, as I said, they were always at meal with Jesus, and sharing those moments where bread was broken, where the blessing was said, and where they, in fellowship, came to know each other in intimacy, in that experience, they were experiencing community.

And so, I like Dominic Crossan's suggestion that Easter wasn't all crammed into one day or one week or even forty days, but rather, that Easter continued to happen. Easter continued to happen wherever those who had been with Jesus and lived with him and had experienced him broke bread with one another and looked each other in the eye and said, "O my God! He's here. The crucified one lives. Jesus is with us still." The presence of God experienced in the breaking of bread was the confirmation of the fact that the story didn't end on the cross, but there was something more, that ongoing presence of the holy and the sacred in the midst of the community of those who broke bread together.

The Gospel of John is preeminently the Gospel of incarnation. "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God, and the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld him." Or, in the letter of John, "No one has seen God, but the one who dwells in love, God dwells in that one." The letter that begins, "The word of life that our hands have handled, our eyes have looked upon," the tangibility of the love of God in the flesh of Jesus - that was the heart of John's Gospel. The word became flesh and, if you hear it, what the gospel is saying is that God is revealed in the human, that the human being becomes the mirror, the reflector, the container of God. Jesus, in this Gospel, in response to the request, "Show us the father and we will be satisfied," says "If you have seen me, you have seen the father."

Now, once again, the tendency of the Church has been to take that, isolate that, elevate that, make that a once-for-all preeminent, supreme revelation of God to which we always hark back. But, if we could hear the Gospel, we would hear the message as being that God is revealed in the human, and that means in the flesh of Jesus, and it means in your flesh and in my flesh – that the revelation of God is revealed in the humanity of those who are God's creatures.

Incarnation was not once for all. Revelatory luminosity did not nest in one alone. In Jesus we saw it first. In Jesus, they saw it clearly. In Jesus, they said, "O my God!" And he was crucified. And they gathered together here and there, now and again, in this grouping and that grouping. And as they sat at table and they blessed and broke the bread, suddenly they knew in the midst of them who he was. It is in the breaking of bread that God is present. It is in the sharing of a meal that God is experienced, tangibly. It is in looking into the eyes of another and feeling melded to the soul of another and coming into the intimacy of communion that God is experienced.

Companions - that is what we are. That is the mark of community. The word companion comes from the Latin prefix *con*, with, and *panis*, bread. The word

companion means with bread. A companion is one with whom one shares a meal, with whom one breaks bread, because to break bread with another is to enter into a dimension of intimacy, and that intimate relationship of sharing a meal is a locus of the revelation of God, of the experience of God. I really believe that is what those post-resurrection stories are trying to tell us - that it was in the continuing gathering of those who had been with him and loved him that they experienced him in the action that had marked him and their relationship with him, at table in fellowship.

It is something to experience – in a ritualized service like this. In 1990, when we changed our format from passing plates down the rows to coming forward, I for the first time experienced the wonder of a Eucharist feast, because I have had the privilege of taking the bread and catching the eye, and in a moment of intimacy, being able to say "The body of Christ." I'll tell you that is high drama. That is a sacred moment, a beautiful experience, because it is in that moment that God is present in the body of Christ represented in the bread.

But it is not the bread. The Church has had such arguments about what happens to the bread or what happens to the wine. It's not about bread and wine. It's about soul to soul, eye to eye, person to person. It's about companions who break bread and who in a community of love, time and again, say, "O my God!" And there's a feast to follow, and the potential for God to be experienced in this ritual is no greater than the possibility of God being experienced in the courtyard. I hate to admit that because next year Bob's going to say, "Well then, why don't we just dispense with worship?" And I love worship. As much as I love to eat, I love worship more.

But, it's the same thing if I am true to my principle - it's when you're gathered at table, when there is communion, when soul meets soul and eye meets eye, when there is love and grace, where there is forgiveness and understanding and awareness and attention - there God is present. There God is revealed; there God is known; they recognized him. In other words, *to re-cognize*, cognizance, knowing, re-cognizance, to know again, to know as the one as the same as before, to become aware again of what you knew before. The one you knew you want to see in Galilee. The one you knew, you recognize, your eyes are open, you say, "Oh, oh, oh, aah! That's it! Jesus lives. God is present. All is not lost. All will be well."

And so, in a few moments around those tables, if you take a moment and don't immediately dig into the roast pork or the sweet corn, but if you take a moment to look at those around the table, a moment of recognition, a moment of loving embrace where souls meet souls and the community of God's people, God is there. God will be there. You will be awash with the presence of God. Bread, wine, fish, sweet corn, pig roast - the means is indifferent. It is the relationship. It is the community. God in the presence.

Sometime ago I made a hospital visit and the person I was visiting had a visitor, a person I had known for a long time a long time ago, but hadn't seen for a long

time, and he had not seen me. As I came into the room, he became somewhat startled, and he said, "Oh, oh, I haven't seen you for a long time. You've put on a lot of weight." And I said to him, "Yes, that's true, and thank you for mentioning it." You know, some things are better left unsaid because all of us who fit the national profile of being overweight know it, and we really know what we should be doing about it, but we all have our rationalizations, too, and I have mine, and it's simply the nature of my life in ministry. I'm very serious, it's the nature of my life in ministry. Somebody is always saying to me, as Jesus did, "Come and have breakfast" or lunch or dinner. My whole life is a life of companionship, companionship with myriads of people with all sorts of conditions, wonderful people, wonderful moments of breaking bread and of being aware of one another and being in conversation, being in the intimacy of human connection. I suppose it's not just the bread. It's probably what I wash it down with, but besides that, it isn't easy to stay trim when you are a companion of so many wonderful people

But, I'm deadly serious. You hear me speak often of my Tuesday pilgrimage to Grand Rapids where in a little corner of Duba's bar there is a table set and a band of brothers meets and when we are all assembled, we lift our glasses and our host says, not infrequently with a trembling voice, "To the wonder, miracle, glory and joy of life." I want you to know that God is present and that place is awash with the holy and the sacred. That ritual, that moment, that human community - what can you say but, "O God!"