

“The Mystery of Holy Communion”
John 6:24-35
Sunday, August 2, 2015
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Remember Simon and Garfunkel? Remember that line, “Where have you gone, Joe DiMaggio, a nation turns its lonely eyes to you...woo-hoo-hoo. What's that you say, Mrs. Robinson? Joltin' Joe has left and gone away...hey-hey-hey...hey-hey-hey.” Originally part of the soundtrack for the film “The Graduate,” the song “Mrs. Robinson” has become one of the '60s' best-known, iconic ballads.

But in a 60 Minutes interview a few years back, Paul Simon mentioned that some time after the song was released, he received a letter from Joe DiMaggio in which DiMaggio expressed his befuddlement at what in the world that song could mean. DiMaggio wrote, “What do you mean ‘Where have I gone?’ I haven't gone anywhere! I'm still around -- I'm selling Mr. Coffee.” Then Mr. Simon smiled wryly at Mike Wallace and remarked, “Obviously Mr. DiMaggio is not accustomed to thinking of himself as a metaphor!” (Scott Hoezee).

I. Bread, a metaphor.

Last Sunday we read two stories of Jesus from the sixth chapter of John. We reflected on Jesus feeding a crowd of five thousand men, plus women and children. And we contemplated Jesus walking on water to meet the disciples in their boat.

Today we continue on in John, chapter 6. For the next few Sundays we will dig in to Jesus' teachings about bread. As with every theme in John, this concept of bread is highly symbolic and, in many ways, a mystery. In fact, the word “sacrament” means “mystery.” This morning, we reflect on the mystery of Holy Communion. The sacrament of bread.

The crowds have just been fed by Jesus. They hop into boats and chase after him, meeting him and the disciples “on the other side of the sea” (v. 25). They do not know how Jesus has managed to feed them all with just 5 loaves and 2 fish; they only know that they are hungry and that they want more. They believe Jesus to be like the prophet, Moses, and they want to crown him king so they can always have enough food to eat. Jesus says, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son will give you” (v. 27).

Here’s our first clue in the mystery of Holy Communion: it’s not really about bread. It’s about something eternal. Bread is a symbol, a metaphor. Bread is not the thing; bread signifies the thing.

II. Jesus, the thing signified.

Jesus explains an unfathomable mystery. He talks for a very long time about bread. Jesus gently and patiently talks to us about himself, using bread as a metaphor.

The crowd is caught in the immediacy of food to eat, physical food for physical bodies. They see Jesus as a modern day Moses who can give them such food.

But Jesus is not like Moses. Jesus is more than Moses. God feeds the hungry people with manna from heaven; so does Jesus. Jesus is not a prophet in the same way Moses is a prophet. The presence of Jesus is the presence of God. The acts which Jesus performs are acts of God, not acts in the name of God. Jesus is the only Son of God, and as such has power to act in ways none of the previous prophets have had.

He rebukes the crowd for being blind and willful. They are blind because they see only food. They miss the signs of something more meaningful which is happening before their very eyes.

They are willful because they want to be in charge. They ask, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” (v. 28). They want to be in control of their own lives, their own futures. They want to be able to make bread appear from heaven. They want to learn the secrets of prophethood, which Jesus obviously knows. They want to be like Moses, too.

Jesus responds by telling them they must simply believe. He says, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent” (v. 29).

Here’s our second clue in the mystery of Holy Communion: The bread is Jesus, and Jesus is God among us.

Jesus is communicating the meaning of the Incarnation. God has chosen to become flesh through the Son, Jesus, the Christ, who stands before them, teaching.

Frederick Buechner offers these insights:

“ ‘The Word became flesh, [says the Gospel of John], ‘and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.’ That is what incarnation means. It is untheological. It is unsophisticated. It is undignified. But according to Christianity it is the way things are.

“All religions and philosophies which deny the reality or the significance of the material, the fleshly, the earth-bound, are themselves denied. Moses at the burning bush was told to take off his shoes because the ground on which he stood was holy ground because God not only made it but walked on it, ate and slept and worked and died on it. If we are saved anywhere, we are saved here. And what is saved is not some diaphanous distillation of our bodies and our earth but our bodies and our earth themselves. Jerusalem becomes the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband. Our bodies are sown perishable and raised imperishable.

“One of the blunders religious people are particularly fond of making is the attempt to be

more spiritual than God.”

The crowd is not happy with this answer. They want to be in control even of faith. They ask, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” (vv. 30-31). They want more food; then maybe, just maybe, they can believe.

Jesus is adamant. The immediate gratification of bread and fish will not meet their ultimate needs. “I am the bread of life,” he asserts (v. 35).

Bishop Will Willimon comments:

“Faith means encounter with a person, one who is ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (14:6). The one who speaks to us in this peculiarly metaphorical way is the one who desires not only that we think about him but that we feed on him, ingest him, implying that we could starve to death without him.”

Closing.

It is, in a way, truly crazy for me to stand up here and try to explain the holy mystery of Communion. As if I could explain it better than Jesus does. As if it is something knowable in the way worldly knowledge is a commodity that can be owned.

John Calvin was once asked to explain Communion; he replied that he would “rather experience it than...understand it.”

When we eat the bread and drink from the cup, we encounter the One who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6). He is not of this world. He is from heaven, and He offers himself to the whole world.

Let’s meet Him together, at the Table He has prepared for us. Amen.