

1 Corinthians 11:23-26
John 6:48-58

July 19, 2011
Presbytery of Seattle

“The Bread of Life, the Bread of Heaven”

The first thing I would ask of you is this: stop whatever you are doing. Stop thinking about what you did today; stop thinking about our agenda for this evening. Stop thinking about the email you sent or the text or tweet you intend to send. Stop. Come to quietness in yourself.

Now, receive this Good News: God is here. Jesus Christ is here. The Holy Spirit is here. God is with us: Emmanuel.

God is not here because we invited God, or because we are seeking God. God is here seeking us. God is here to be in union with us, and to bring us into union with God. God is here to be the life in us, and to make us members of Christ’s own body. God is here to make real and actual what God has planned since before creation: God will dwell in us and we will dwell in God. Right now, God is here inviting us to abide in God, and he is abiding in us.

Forty years ago this month I preached before a presbytery for the first time, and the title of the sermon was “Christ—The Sacrament in You.” I’m afraid I still have the same theme. I’m in good company, according to T. H. L. Parker, who has written many books on John Calvin, including Calvin’s Preaching. In the 680 sermons that have survived, Calvin keeps coming back to the same theme, said in various ways, what Parker calls his “point of view,” basically: That the hidden God reveals God’s self for our eternal and temporal good; that God is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who makes us members of his own body, and so God regards us. According to Calvin—and I admire his sacramental theology above all—the living Christ presents himself to us in Word and sacrament alike. When we hear the Word of God, first of all understood as Jesus Christ himself—we are hearing God speak to us in this moment. When we receive his word joined to act in a Sacrament, we receive what is signified: we are truly adopted as God’s children; we receive his life within us. Listen to Calvin when he begins his treatment of the Sacrament of Holy Communion in Book IV of the Institutes:

“Now Christ is the only food of our soul, and therefore our Heavenly Father invites us to Christ that, refreshed by partaking of him, we may repeatedly gather strength until we shall have reached heavenly immortality.” [IV,17, 1]

So the gracious Word of God, Jesus Christ himself, “the only food of our soul,” enters our hearts and minds through the sacramental hearing of that Word, and in the Sacrament we are truly receiving him into our bodies.

Professor Dawn DeVries, now of Union Seminary in Virginia, wrote a book on Calvin’s preaching. She points out that, of those approximately 680 extant sermons, only one is on the Resurrection. Preached on an Easter Sunday in Geneva, DeVries concludes: “The whole sermon . . . may be seen as an invitation to the Table that is issued by Christ himself—the present Christ, who speaks through the mouth of his minister.” [p. 40] Calvin says: “Jesus wills us to come to him, ‘and he does not wait for us to look for him but he has provided that we might be called by the preaching of the Gospel and that this message might be spoken by the mouths of his heralds.’” Ibid.

We may observe that, while this is his only surviving sermon on the Resurrection, it is utterly consistent with that “point of view” identified by Parker as running through them all. Calvin ends his sermon on the Resurrection text from Matthew 28 as follows:

“Let us realize the unity that we have with our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, he is willing to have a common life with us, and that what he has may be ours, even that he wishes to dwell in us, not in imagination but in fact . . . that he so works by the power of his Holy Spirit that we are united to him more than are the members of a body.” Ibid.

Let me repeat that:

“Let us realize the unity that we have with our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, he is willing to have a common life with us, and that what he has may be ours, even that he wishes to dwell in us, not in imagination but in fact . . . that he so works by the power of his Holy Spirit that we are united to him more than are the members of a body.”

So you and I are more united to Jesus Christ in this moment, on this otherwise ordinary July evening in Redmond, Washington, than we are to our own right arms or left legs! It is no surprise then, that when Calvin writes about the Eucharist in the Institutes, he very often cites John 6 as his text, where Jesus said: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.” [John 6:56-57]

Jesus Christ is the Bread of Life, right now, and we live because he is alive in us. But it is not for this life only that he gives himself to us. No, for in this Sacrament we also receive the

New Covenant. In 1 Corinthians 11, St. Paul recalls the tradition—literally, “that which was handed down to us”—as follows:

“ . . . the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed, took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way he took the cup also after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For, as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”

In other words, as a footnote in the Oxford Annotated NRSV Bible puts it, “The celebration is a sermon on ‘Christ crucified,’” which St. Paul claims as his only theme. God came to us utterly in Jesus the Christ, not merely to teach us, nor to organize us, nor to encourage us, but to be crucified for us! Thus, the Word of God to us today, spoken by the Living Word, Jesus our Lord, who is present in the proclamation of his Word and in the Sacrament he invites us to receive from his own hand, is this:

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life,
and I will raise them up on the last day, for my flesh is real food,
and my blood is true drink.”

He who speaks is the Bread of Life. He who is right now inviting us to his Table, inviting us into union with himself, is the Bread of Heaven. Receive him and live!

To Him be the Glory now and forever! Amen.

Dawn DeVries, *Jesus Christ in the Preaching of Calvin and Schleiermacher*, Westminster / John Knox Press (Louisville, Ky.) 1996.

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