

“Sabbath in Sacraments”
Acts 2: 43-47, Luke 22: 14-20
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Before I begin, let me thank you for the opportunity to be here with you as we share Word and Table together. Chris has told me so much about you, about the many strengths of this congregation, and how much she loves you. I thank God for you, and the witness to the gospel you have kept faithfully in this community. I also want to bring you greetings from the First Presbyterian Church in Granville, Ohio; a few of you have even worshipped with us there. It is a small world that continually gets smaller.

Let me also add that I'm aware of how strange this must be for you to have me in your pulpit. Our family and friends have had to live with this for years. The way we look alike, sound alike, gesture the same way, and even use the same inflections in our voices. Honestly, it's a little weird for us, too. My only hope is that this quirk of similarity won't distract too much from our worship this morning.

As I understand it, this summer you have been exploring Sabbath – the way God blesses us with times and places where the sacred can be found, where we can find rest in God's presence. Sabbath is that sacred space where we remember who we are and whose we are.

Sacraments are perhaps the most transparent of all Sabbath gifts. They are visible signs of an invisible grace. In baptism we are given the gift of our identity: we belong to God, and are claimed as God's beloved children, brothers and sisters in Christ. Whatever else we are, however else the world sees us and measures us, whatever our job title, our family relationships, our income bracket, our ACT scores, or the names we're known by, we are, body and soul, heart and mind, children of the living God.

But the sacrament I want to focus on this morning is communion. As both Chris and Ron know, I had a hard time settling on scripture for this morning's service. Part of it is that I usually preach from the lectionary and don't have to think much about where to start. But more because there are so many scripture passages that could speak to us today.

I thought, for instance, about the feeding stories in the gospels. There is only one miracle that made it into all four gospels, and that's the feeding of the multitudes. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all have their accounts of this miracle.

The crowds come to hear Jesus, and so much time goes by that they have to have something to eat. The disciples don't know what to do, how to take care of all these people; it's just too much. But Jesus has compassion on them, and even though he knows that no one lives by bread alone he also understood the need for bread – sustenance, nourishment, food for both body and soul. This is a miracle of grace– inviting us to trust in the goodness of God.

But then I thought of all the stories of Jesus eating with people – even untouchables, the unsavory, unlovable people. He ate with pious Pharisees, to be sure, the religious upright of his

day, but also with tax collectors and sinners. He was called on the carpet for his taste in dinner companions. It wasn't seemly, you see. It just wasn't done. He was lowering himself by eating with them. It was downright offensive, the way he was so indiscriminant. Those stories are Sabbath grace, too – the way everyone is invited to his table, how no one is ever turned away.

Finally I settled on the story from the Gospel we heard this morning - the way the Lord's supper first began –the last supper before Jesus died. How he gave his disciples this gift, this profound way to remember his presence. Such simple elements he offered – a loaf of bread, a cup of wine – ordinary, everyday things that would always be with them. No special place, no Temple priests, no sacred altar, golden chalices, pressed linen. Just bread and wine, and each other, united by the memory of this moment.

“Take, eat, and remember,” Jesus said.

“Wherever two or three or gathered, there I am in the midst of you.”

“This is my body broken for you.”

“I am the bread of life.”

“This is the cup of the new covenant.”

“Do this in remembrance of me.”

At the heart of it all is this gift. He feeds us. Jesus offers us his own self, his own life, his own flesh and blood, that we might live. All he wants is that we will come and sit and feast with him – that we will stop long enough from our frenetic lives to taste and see that the Lord is good, in fact the goodness we most deeply long for.

We make it so much harder than it needs to be. We want to earn it, to deserve it, to somehow believe we have done something to warrant this gift. We don't like to owe anything to anyone; we want to be self-reliant, independent. We know the way the world is supposed to work: tit for tat, keep tabs on what people have done for you so you can pay them back; reciprocate, hopefully as soon as possible. You don't want to be one down. God forbid we should be in somebody's debt.

Except that God expects it, hopes for it, longs for the day when we will quit trying to make our own way in this world and be so blasted independent and self-reliant. God simply wants to feed us at this table. God wants us to depend on him.

What will it take? What does it take for us to sit, and find rest for our souls?

More than anything else, we have to admit we are hungry. We have to stop long enough to feel that deep growling in our souls, that deep longing that never goes away. We have to turn down the noise and the distractions and stop the busyness long enough to know that we are hungry, starving, in fact, for the goodness that only God can offer. It can be painful, this knowledge, especially if we have avoided facing it for long.

I had this lesson pressed upon me two years ago when I was on sabbatical. I had been in ministry for twenty years, and the last four had been particularly difficult. My church in Granville was without an associate pastor for two of the three years, so the work load itself was hard. We were beset by an extraordinary number of tragedies in our little town, including the deaths of two staff members to cancer. To say that I was exhausted doesn't begin to describe it. I didn't know where I would find the energy to keep going in this ministry I loved.

I was grateful beyond words for the Sabbatical I was granted. One of the first things I did was go to Iona, a little island off the West coast of Scotland, the island where the Irish St. Columba was said to have begun his ministry to the pagans of Europe. It is where, they say, the Book of Kells was started. It is no doubt an ancient, sacred place, where pilgrims have traveled for years, seeking the presence of the divine. Restored in the last century, the Abbey at Iona has become a haven for those seeking renewal and inspiration.

I went to Iona on my own pilgrimage, to discover I knew not what, but knowing that I was starving for the presence of God. Arriving at this remote, wind-swept island was a journey in itself, removing layer after layer and burden after burden. It was as though no troubles could reach me in this far-away place. The rocks, the sky, the sea all colluded to remind me that life went on and on, long before I had arrived and long after I would be gone. I recognized how small I really was, and I was grateful.

I had hoped to feel God's presence here, but I knew enough not to force it. And then it happened one night in the Cathedral. A young man was giving a concert of sorts; Tim was his name, a gifted young musician on a one-year-leave from his Ph.D. studies in music. He played the piano for us, an offering of his own faith.

It was late when he began – 10:00 or so, after the dark had settled into that summer Northern night. The chapel was lit by candlelight, casting shadows across the ancient pillars. We sat in silence as the first notes began to play.

I found myself lost in the music. It was like water, like rain, like the notes were pouring all around me. I felt my heart ache with a longing I had not felt for years – like it was cracking wide open. My chest hurt with the pain of it. Then the tears came, came flowing down, flowing with the notes falling all around me.

A vision came to me that night. I don't know how else to describe it. It was a vision of what my life was like. I was in a room – a small, circular room with no windows. My family was there with me, though I could not see them. The center of the room was taken up by a gigantic statue. It was a statue of God, of the Church, of everything my work had become. It was a statue of my own making, an idol I had built. It was what I thought God wanted. But it wasn't. It wasn't what God wanted at all.

And I wept.

In my tears I offered up a prayer: that God would show me another way, something else to replace the image that my life had become. And amazingly, graciously, it came. The statue was swept away. The room was still the same, small circle, and my family was still there, though now I could see them. And in the center was something new.

It was a table.

It was what God wanted to give me. A place at the table. To feed me. To unite me with people I loved. To offer the grace I had thought for so long I needed to earn or deserve. It was pure gift. I felt love overflow.

Here is what I know now: we don't have to be good to come to Christ's table. We just have to want him. We have to be hungry – to know that need deep inside that we work so hard to pretend isn't there. To accept our place in the family of God.

We don't have to have something to offer. God doesn't want our idolatry, our statues, our vain attempts to create a world in our own image. All God wants is for us to answer his gracious invitation, to taste and see that he is good.

When the disciples first began to gather after Jesus rose, they felt the presence of the Spirit with them. They shared their memories of him, with each other and with all who would hear the good news. They shared everything they had with one another, and broke bread together with glad and generous hearts. So the church began. Around the table, sharing bread and wine, and remembering.

So it is now. Here we are, again, around this table. The bread will be broken for us, the wine poured out for our refreshment. This is the Lord's table, and he wants nothing more than to feed us. Take, and eat. This is Christ's body broken for you. Find Sabbath.