

A Sermon by the Rev. Roger Wm. Smith on the Third Sunday of Easter, May 8, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

About Bread

There is a lot in the news about hunger.

All of those migrant workers caught on the coast of Libya have no food. When the tornadoes tore Tuscaloosa apart, it was nearly impossible to get food to the victims. When that Japanese granny was for 7 days trapped under the debris of the earthquake, she was hungry. How can we forget those pictures of starving children in famine ravaged Africa?

This is a Sermon about bread.

Text: "When (Jesus) was at table with them, he took bread, he blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him...."

Luke 24:30

+ In the Name of God....

When we take a loaf of bread into our hands we are holding a lot of history. Before that bread reaches us, someone must bake it, package it, market it, transport it, price it, and put it on the shelf in some sort of shop.

But before that, someone had to clear the land, till the soil, plant the seed, harvest the grain, thresh the wheat, transport it to the mill, and make it into flour.

These things include the full spectrum of our political, economic and social structure. It includes such things as farm price subsidies, labor unions, the truckers and the lobbyists, the regulations of the food and drug administration; not to mention the sweat—and, yes, sometimes the blood and tears—of human labor.

Along side these things, of course, are the wheeling and dealing, the greed and exploitation that so characterizes the politics and desires of human society.

All of that history is baked into this single loaf of bread. No doubt a loaf of bread baked in the 1st Century was just as tainted by the sweat and sleaze of the world as one baked today. Surely Jesus must have known that. He was acutely aware of the pain and hunger—both physical and spiritual—that mark life in this world.

Such is also true of the bread we offer in the Eucharist. There is a lot of human history baked into those little loaves that we place on the Lord's table. When we offer this bread to God, it is received by him and made new. It is cleansed of all the soil and sorrow that was baked into it.

When we break the bread, just as Jesus did with the disciples that first Easter night, two very important things happen: (1) It is broken so that we might **recognized the Risen Christ present among us**, and (2) it is broken so that he might **share it with one another**.

Every Sunday and Holy Day, throughout the world Christians gather at the Lord's Table to celebrate Mass, the Holy Eucharist, or what in New Testament Times they called, the Breaking of Bread.

The French theologian Louis Evely has written of this:

“You do not go to the Eucharist to serve God;
You go to learn *how God breaks bread*,
so that you can go and do it the same way,
because God is known in the breaking of bread...”

Because the broken loaf can be shared by many, it brings nourishment to the bodies and spirits of hungering humanity.

When we read the Communion Service, one wonders if the significance of the words might not fly right over our heads. Looking back over my own life, I estimate that I have conducted this service no less than 14 hundred times. As I do this, what do the words of the liturgy mean to me?

This question prompts me to devote the next several Sundays listening to those words and considering what they mean.

Let's begin with that opening prayer....

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

This prayer is a theological statement. It summarizes the three attributes of God.

First, God is omnipotent, i.e. all powerful. We address him as “Almighty God.” You say that in Spanish as *Dios Omnipotente*. When we lived in the Caribbean I was occasionally asked to celebrate Mass in Spanish. I suspect they are still laughing. I never did learn how to pronounce “omnipotente”....

You know, maybe God would prefer us not to say that about him. To call him Omnipotent or Almighty puts too much distance between him and us... too many light years between heaven and earth. It might be better to say, as Bob Hansel always did, “Good and Gracious God”. I like that: Good and Gracious God to you all hearts are open, all desires are known, and from you no secrets are hid.

Which reminds us of the **second** attribute. We believe God is omniscient—all knowing. He knows all our desires, and we can't hide our secrets from him.

In the vespers service they use in All Faiths Chapel on Fripp Island, they use this prayer, but they omit that part about God knowing all of our desires. This was probably a typographical error, but...Fruedian that I am—I accused them of leaving that out because they didn't want to think about a God who knows all of our desires. When you and I take an honest inventory of all of our desires, we might be like those Fripp islanders. A God who knows everything about us makes me want to hide under the table. One pictures such a deity who is frowning all of the time.

But that's not the God Jesus reveals to us.

He is not so much all-knowing as he is all *compassionate*. He is not frowning at us, he weeps with us.

The **third** attribute appears when we ask God to cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, so that we may perfectly love and worthily magnify the Holy Name of God. This suggests the omnipresence of God. He is present with us—right here next to us, within us, all around us.

You will note that this part of the prayer is a little off the rails biologically. We think with our brain, not with our hearts. But the use of the word "hearts" is a poetic way of giving vivid expression to the *intimacy* of our compassionate God. He is not somewhere way out in space; he is as close as your next heartbeat—ready and eager to cleanse us of all the stuff that messes up our lives.

This prayer has been used at the opening of the Eucharistic Liturgy since the 9th century. The word "Eucharist" means thanksgiving. When we open the liturgy with the words of this prayer, we are reminded that we have so much to be thankful for. Our God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. God is good and gracious. In his compassion he weeps with us. In his intimacy he cleanses us, making us perfectly worthy to gather at his table and be nourished by and to share with others the broken bread...this bread of heaven.

Next week we will look at the *Gloria in excelsis*, the hymn following that we sing every Sunday after the opening prayer.