

“Working at Believing”

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
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New Testament Lesson: John 6:24-35

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 34:11-14

Did you know that the food you eat – what you snack on – says a lot about who you are? Alan Hirsch, the neurological director of the Smell and Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago, gave personality tests to 800 volunteers and then asked them to name their favorite snacks.

The results were astounding.¹ People who share a personality types choose the same snack food 95 percent of the time.

For instance, people who love cheese curls have a high sense of morals and ethics. If you have a real passion for popcorn, you’re probably the take-charge type. Folks who are nutty for nuts are even-tempered, easy to get along with and highly empathetic. Have I told you how much I love cheese curls, popcorn, and nuts?!? It goes with my high morals, take-charge, empathetic personality. Just kidding.

Actually, what Hirsch discovered makes perfect sense – biologically. “Food preferences reside in the olfactory lobe,” he says, “the same part of the brain where the personality resides.” As it turns out, you really are what you eat. So when Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty,” we better take that seriously.

That’s what I hope to help us do today: take seriously what we have come to believe about Holy Communion; how it nourishes us, both body and soul. Every time I take Communion, I think about the act of eating. Even when we’re eating a small piece of bread, we tear it up and grind it down with our teeth, we take its essence into our bodies, and we use the fuel it gives us to live and work and play and even to take our rest, safely and soundly.

The juice – the non-fermented wine, if you will – it mingles with the fluids in our bodies, coursing through our system, ensuring our vitality and our very lives. I haven’t always thought that way about Communion, and that’s not all that I think about and experience in receiving Communion.

In fact, did you notice the first time a mentioned Communion today, I referred to it as “taking Communion.” And then just now, I said “receiving Communion.” It makes a difference, doesn’t it, whether we think of it as taking Communion, or receiving it?

¹ *Alternative Medicine* (May 2007).

How we orient ourselves in receiving Communion and what we believe about it makes a big difference in our experience of it, and not only our experience of Communion, but our experience of God and Jesus, our experience of our fellow human beings, and all creation.

Let's look at how the earliest followers of Jesus oriented themselves to his presence and his teaching about *Communion*, which Jesus identifies as the true bread from heaven.

When the crowds following Jesus found him on the other side of the lake, they said to him, 'Rabbi, when did you come here?' Jesus answered them, 'Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you....' Then they said to him, 'What must we do to perform the works of God?' Jesus answered them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.'" Believing in God and in God's son, Jesus Christ, is the work of those who are faithful to God's word in scripture.

If that's true, we sure do spend a lot of time and effort doing other stuff that doesn't have anything to do with believing in God and Jesus. But the key is that everything we do to occupy our days has everything to do with God and Jesus, as long as we do it in the spirit of God. Take Communion for example – eh, I mean, receiving Communion is a good example.

It's easy to receive Communion and not give it much thought. It's easy to sit and think about other stuff while we're waiting for the Communion service to be over. What's harder is praying about and thinking about Communion as we receive it, and also for the whole time we're waiting to sing our closing hymn – or for many, waiting for others to sing our closing hymn. Singing hymns when you can't sing is hard. Praying and thinking about Communion every time you receive it is hard. I get that. I've been there. Even as a pastor – especially as a pastor – I'm still there, right alongside you. My work in receiving Communion and the work of our servers involves keeping track of things while trying to maintain a spiritual connection to what's happening. It's work.

That's OK. We all have to work at our faith lives and our spiritual practices. The biggest concern is not that we have to work at our faith lives and spiritual practices, but rather that we sometimes fail to do so. When we "take" Communion without working at it, spiritually, we miss out on its power in our lives. This was Jesus' concern with the crowd of followers on that day which John tells us about in today's New Testament lesson.

The crowd is chasing after Jesus because they know he's got something they need, something they desperately want, something that's calling to them deep down inside. The problem is they don't know what that something is or how to get it. They confuse it with ordinary stuff that we have to work for to attain. Something we get only by doing something to earn it.

I mean just look, when Jesus tells them that it is “believing” not “doing” that’s important to their future, important to God, just look at what they do? They ask Jesus to *do something*, they want a miracle from Jesus so that they can believe. They say, “What work (what miracle) are *you* performing” that we may see it and believe you?”

Well, that’s the atheist’s position – proof before faith. And yet, without faith, there is no way to satisfy that position, no way to dispute it. Everything starts with faith. ***Faith is the work of God’s people.*** The crowds of Jesus’ day are like the atheists of our day – they are stuck in the past, while Jesus is longing to assure them of their future, longing to bring them to himself. And we fall into the same trap from time to time don’t we? We make demands of Jesus instead of prayerfully and thoughtfully receiving what he longs to give us.

Listen to what the crowd points to in demanding a miracle of Jesus so that they might believe in him. They say, “Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness. What sign are going to give us?” They want a sign from Jesus and Jesus wants to give them so much more – Jesus wants to give them –and us--himself! So Jesus answers them, saying “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who *gives* you (today) the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” That which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world is Jesus! ***Jesus is the bread of life!*** Which we celebrate and remember and internalize in Holy Communion.

In the wilderness, when the ancient Israelites were starving to death, God sent Jesus in the form of manna from heaven to feed them, body and soul. I mean getting the manna was good, but without any spiritual assurance and encouragement along with it, it would not have been enough. If that manna had not also brought the Israelites a renewed belief in God’s love for them, God’s provision for them, God’s guidance for them, God’s presence with them, they’d still be stuck out there. Without God in the bread, they are lost, both in spirit and in the wilderness of ancient Egypt.

So the question for us is, what keeps us from getting lost in the wilderness of modern life? What keeps us from starving, both physically and spiritually? The answer is always the same – Jesus!

If you don’t know what to think about when *receiving* communion today, think about Jesus. Think about Jesus being in all parts of creation, and sustaining us body and soul. Think about Jesus giving himself to us, that we would have life – and life eternal!

Think about the spirit of Jesus being the same spirit that you have in you *and* that your neighbor has, the same spirit that calls us to give of ourselves for the sake of others, the same spirit that promises us when we do give of ourselves that we receive so much more. That is what we can think about while receiving Communion today.

In giving of ourselves for the sake of Christ, for the sake of the Church, for the sake of God's people, for that sake of Christ's message, we receive the true gifts of God, the gifts of joy, and peace, and hope, and promise. And all God asks of us is that we first believe in Jesus, and then in that belief, we do stuff that reflects our faith as his followers. Amen.

Pastoral prayer:

God of communion and community, enter once again into our hearts and world, that we might be joined to you and to each other.

From the beginning of time, your Wisdom has been at work, giving beauty and meaning to all creation.

We pray for those whose circumstances leave them starving for beauty and crying out for explanations.

Give us, we pray, your spirit of Wisdom, that we might express your will through our response.

On an earth where too many work for too little reward, where many are left wondering about the source of tomorrow's food, we pray your spirit of justice and provision.

Give us the Wisdom to do your will, that we might share your love with all, working together for the community you long to fashion.

And, Lord, unity us now in this community, as we raise our eyes to heaven and our voices to you in prayer, singing together the prayer that you taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**