



University Christian Church- Austin

C. Kutz-Marks

## **No One Alone**

World Communion Sunday

John 6:1-14

"He looked up to heaven...blessed and broke..." Familiar sounding words. Reminiscent of the Last Supper. A foreshadowing of what we ourselves will do today on this World Communion Sunday...a wonderful tradition, the most visible reminder I know of that all these disparate Christian congregations around the neighborhood, around the city, around the nation, and yes, around the globe, regardless of denominational label - Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian... - really are ONE CHURCH, the Church of Jesus Christ.

Our one loaf of several breads on the Communion Table this morning is a representative polyglot of the bread staples the world over.

-One part is white bread that has been a staple of our part of the world many decades.

-One part is corn bread which native Americans cooked long before European settlers arrived, who then made corn bread in several different versions a staple of their own.

-This darker bread is a type of rye bread, made from the rye grain which grows well in the colder, wetter climates of northern Europe especially Scandinavia, where special cooking techniques are required to attain a risen

loaf, so where it is instead often eaten as a cracker-like flat bread. Pick that up at Ikea!

And finally, barley, an ancient grain that has been collected and eaten in the near east for at least 17,000 yrs. and cultivated throughout history. In his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Gun, Germs and Steel*<sup>i</sup>, author Jared Diamond argued that it was the cultivating of the barley crop of south Eurasia – along with some other animal and domesticable crops, that significantly contributed to the broad historical patterns that human history has followed over approximately the last 13,000 years; especially explaining why Eurasian civilizations, as a whole, have survived and conquered others.<sup>ii</sup>

Barley was the main food source for Jesus, his disciples, and, in fact, for most of the biblical characters we could name.

Our scripture passage this morning is a well-known one, the feeding of the 5,000. Of all Jesus' miracles, this is the only one repeated in all four gospels.<sup>iii</sup> Five loaves barley loaves – flat and round ones like this- , and two small fish – gee I left them on the chair where you are sitting, Doug. Only kidding- you'll have to imagine the fish ...and by the time it is all over, 5,000 men PLUS their women and children had been fed and were satisfied, with twelve baskets of left-overs collected. How did Jesus do that? I have no idea.

One suggestion made is that these folks all had food with them to start with, but none wanted to show it for fear that they would have to share; then Jesus confronted them with these meager morsels, and they were more or less shamed into digging into their own picnic buckets (or whatever they had) and finally doing the sharing that they should have done in the first place. I guess that is possible, but I would not bet the farm on it. To be

honest, I am content to remain blissfully ignorant of the details, just happy to celebrate a special moment...a miraculous moment...with all those people there in that countryside beside the Sea of Galilee.

I want to call your attention to one little detail in the story that you might not have thought much about before. Verse 14: Jesus says, "Make them sit down," but in the Gospel of Mark, an older version of this episode, Mark adds that Jesus had them sit down together in groups of 50 and of 100's. Interesting, isn't it? Notice that **NO ONE ATE ALONE** that day! I am sure there were some there who would have preferred to eat alone.

- Some had come for healing who had heard about this miracle worker and were not interested in any chit-chat.
- Some were feeling guilty who had come to hear this teacher in a search for solace who would have appreciated not having to explain why they were out here.
- Some were grieving and would have been content to be left quietly in solitude.
- Some were just plain shy and not all that comfortable being forced to open up to new acquaintances.

In other words, they were typical. Those **THERE** on **THAT** day are also **HERE** on **THIS** day, with those same motivations to sit by oneself, to eat by oneself. But Jesus said, "Make them sit down in groups..." **NO ONE ALONE!**

That was by design. There is something about the Gospel of Jesus Christ that is utterly and inescapably communal. Often we in our more individualistic cultures forget that. Jesus started by gathering friends

around him - 12 of them - and relied on them to help spread His ministry. As the time came for him to end his earthly ministry, his instructions to the disciples were to get out there and make MORE disciples, more friends - we call it the Great Commission. The result of that instruction was the formation of the church - more friends gathered together in the name of Jesus. Even now, in our Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) tradition, the two ordinances, the two liturgical directions from Jesus himself, that we regularly celebrate - Baptism and the Lord's Supper- are communal: baptism is our official introduction of the believer into the community; the Lord's Supper is the way the community is nourished and sustained. NO ONE IS BAPTIZED ALONE; NO ONE CELEBRATES THE LORD'S SUPPER ALONE. The church forces us out of our isolation - there is no such thing as a "Lone Ranger" Christian (and, come to think of it, even the Lone Ranger had Tonto). Jesus said, "Make them sit down in groups..."

Whenever we gather as a congregation downstairs in the Fellowship Hall, or each Sunday when the college students gather in the Student Lounge, there are all sorts of celebrations, all sorts of activities and special studies that draw us together. A sociologist would have a challenge in identifying the commonality between these events. But one thing that sociologist would note is that here at church we never eat alone. You have your food seated at a table for six or eight or ten. There is no way you will be eating alone - the size of the room and its furnishings demand that you eat with someone else – even if you're feeling lonely, or shy, or hurt and would rather be alone. If you eat here, you eat together.

And over the months and years here at UCC, many of you have made acquaintances who became life-long friends at those breakfast tables, those lunch gatherings, those evening meals, whether we initially wanted to make a new friend or not.

Why, once I even met this bubbly young woman in the cafeteria on the Chicago Theological Seminary as she'd slip in the backdoor for breakfast, late, every day, late, and she'd beg food from the servers putting the breakfast food away. Now for over 30 years now, that outlandish young woman and I have fashioned our lives together. The theological term for all these wondrous meetings around tables.... is GRACE, simple, wonderful grace.

One of the images the Bible offers of heaven is a great heavenly banquet. And while we can't be insured of very much about that great heavenly banquet, we can surely guarantee that someone coming into that feast, approaching the headwaiter with a request for "A table for one, please," will hear, "Sorry. None available."

Fred Craddock, one of America's great teachers of preaching, tells the story of another breakfast experience. Dr. Craddock was stuck in Winnipeg, Canada just about this time of year and in the midst of an early October snow storm which paralyzed the city. Everything was shut down and his host could not even make it to Dr. Craddock's hotel to pick him up for breakfast.

So, for breakfast, Fred found himself at a crowded bus depot cafe about two blocks from his hotel. As he entered, somebody scooted over and let him get in a booth . A big man with a greasy apron came over to the table

and asked him what he wanted. Not knowing what the cafe served, Fred asked to see a menu.

"What'd ya want with a menu?" the man asked. "We have soup."

"Then I'll have soup," he said. Just what he wanted--soup for breakfast.

The man brought the soup and Craddock says it was an unusual looking soup. It was grey, the color of a mouse. He did not know what was in it, but he took this spoon and tasted it. Awful! "I can't eat this," he said. So he sat in that crowded cafe warming his hands around the bowl, railing against the world, stuck in Winnipeg.

Then, the door opened and someone yelled, "Close the door," and she did. A woman came in. She was middle-aged, had on a coat, but no covering for her head. Someone scooted over and let her in a booth. The big man with the greasy apron came over and the whole cafe heard this conversation:

"What'd ya want?"

"Bring me a glass of water," she said.

The man brought the water, took out his tablet and repeated the question. "What'd ya want?"

"Just the water."

"Lady, you gotta order something."

"Just the water."

The man's voice started rising: "Lady, I've got paying customers here waiting for a place, now order!"

"Just the water."

"You order something or you get out!"

"Can I stay and get warm?"

"Order or get out."

So, she got up. The people at the table where she was seated got up; people around got up; the folks that let Fred sit at the table got up, Fred got up, and they all started moving towards the door.

"Ok," the big man with the greasy apron said, "She can stay." And everybody sat down. He even brought her a bowl of that soup.

Fred asked the man sitting next to him, "Who is she?"

"I never saw her before," he said, "but if she ain't welcome, ain't nobody welcome."

Then Craddock said, all you could hear was the sound of people eating that soup. "Well, if they can eat it, I can eat it," he said. He picked up his spoon and started eating the soup.

"It was good soup. I ate all of that soup. It was strange soup. I don't remember ever having it. As I left I remembered eating something that tasted like that before. That soup that day tasted like bread and wine. I wished that had happened in a church," he said. "But sometimes it does. Maybe here, maybe this church, maybe..."<sup>iv</sup>

Let us pray.

O God, we are grateful that you call us together and for the table here to which you invite us here and now... and also to that heavenly banquet You will one day provide us. Help us recognize now that oneness in You that we share across all national boundaries and throughout all ages of time. Teach us how to love one another with that deepest love and how to share it with

an ever expanding circle of Your children we are called to claim as friends.  
This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen!

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<sup>i</sup> Diamond, J. (March 1997). *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. W.W. Norton & Company. [ISBN 0-393-03891-2](#).

<sup>ii</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barley>

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:30-44, Luke 9:10-17, John 6:1-13

<sup>iv</sup> Reliant on a sermon by the Rev. Dr. David E. Leininger, A MEAL WITH FRIENDS, Delivered 10/5/97, Text: Luke 9:10-17