

# BREAKING BREAD

a sermon by

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*Text: “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.”*

*Psalm 107:1-3*

Today we celebrate a day when Christians the world over are celebrating the Sacrament of Communion. Throughout the world, the familiar words of Jesus will be spoken in unfamiliar languages. The familiar sight of bread being broken will be disrupted by the use of different kinds of bread. The familiar sight of a cup is to be seen with different cups being held high – some molded with clay, others carved from wood, and still others being made from precious metals.

Today is one day when the Body of Christ – Christians throughout the world – is able to see and to reflect our similarities and our differences.

## I.

With such a universal and individual sight to behold, it is appropriate to consider the words of the 107<sup>th</sup> Psalm:

*“O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.”*

The image of the psalmist, that of collecting people from the east and from the west, includes the image of gathering people who are separated by their despair, and those separated by great distances.

Throughout the 107<sup>th</sup> Psalm, a variety of people are rescued from a variety of calamities.

“Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.”(Psalm 107:4-5)

“Some sat in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in affliction and in irons, for they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High.” (Psalm 107:10-11)

“Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities suffered affliction; they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death.” (Psalm 107:17-18)

“Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep.” (Psalm 107:23-24)

## *II.*

These descriptions of despair are very different; ranging from a desert wasteland, dark imprisonment, sickened by sinfulness and the dangers of seafaring.

But, no matter how different these life-threatening moments may be, they do have three common elements.

The first common element throughout the 107<sup>th</sup> Psalm, and in all moments of human suffering, is that they are very real. We may live in a world of relative peace and security where suffering is absent from our lives, maybe even our memories. And yet, we all live with the reality that suffering is but a moment, perhaps a phone call away.

We may like to think that we are safe from suffering and free from affliction. But that simply is not true. Here, more than in many places, we remember hurricane Katrina and the arrival of the evacuees. Then our region was visited by hurricane Rita, and many of you fled for safety.

Whether we choose to admit it or not, at one time or another, despair and suffering become an inescapable part of life.

The second common element woven throughout the 107<sup>th</sup> Psalm is the common reaction by the people of God. In the different descriptions of despair – whether the desert wasteland or the dark imprisonment, whether the self-inflicted sin-related sickness or even the uncontrollable dangers of the sea – the people of God have a common response.

“Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble ....”

The people of God endure the same difficulties that are part of the universal, human experience. But, as the people of God, we are not defined by our suffering. We are instead to be defined by and recognized for our reflexive response, by our crying out to the LORD.

In that reaction, our crying out to the Lord, we reveal the third and most important common element woven throughout the 107<sup>th</sup> Psalm. Pay careful attention to the reaction of our God. Regardless of the location of the people’s cry – whether it originates from the desert wasteland or dark imprisonment, whether it is from self-inflicted sin-related sickness or the uncontrollable dangers of the sea – our God has a common response.

“Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble and he [the LORD, our God] delivered them from their distress....”

Throughout the human experience, it does not matter where or when we live, the Lord, the living God, is willing and ready to respond to our cries for relief from distress.

How awful it would be if our cries remained unanswered. But, our cries are answered. This is not to say that God will come, like some cosmic superhero, to unravel evil, to restore that which has been destroyed and to set

right every wrong. The deliverance of the Lord does not diminish our worldly danger; neither does it repair every bit of brokenness. But, the deliverance of God is absolutely certain. For some, this deliverance comes in this life, for others it comes in the next. For all, the deliverance and the presence of God are real.

The Psalm ends with the image of the high being brought low and of the needy being raised up. Then, there is this:

*“The upright see it and are glad; and all wickedness stops its mouth. Whoever is wise, let him give heed to these things; let men consider the steadfast love of the LORD.”*

There it is; the commendation that people are to “consider the steadfast love of the LORD.”

Today, as we celebrate the Sacrament of Communion, together with Christians the world over, we do well to consider the steadfast love of the Lord that brings people together from the East and from the West. The image of people coming together is both comforting and beautiful. But, it leads to an interesting question: When people are gathered together, what bread is used?

Now, that may seem like an odd question, but, as good Texans and as good southerners, we acknowledge as a fact of life that not all bread is created equal. Mark Twain, known to be very particular about his cornbread, remarked, “The North thinks it can make cornbread; but the notion is pure fiction. Only the uninformed, or Yankees, put flour in cornbread.”

People far more humble than Mark Twain have enjoyed a particular and personal taste for bread. Some years ago I was honored as the neighborhood Pastor, to attend the 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday of a lady named Miss Mary. Miss Mary enjoyed the celebration. She loved the moment to remember and reflect on the people and moments that filled a century-long life. At one point, someone asked Miss Mary what she missed the most. Other than the people who had moved or passed away, Miss Mary remarked that she missed enjoying a good biscuit. In unison, several dismissed her words and they commented that the loss of taste was a side-effect of aging.

“Miss Mary,” someone asked, “When you baked biscuits, what ingredients did you use?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Mary answered, “fresh-milled flour and bacon fat.”

Now, I am certainly no expert in the science of aging. Perhaps it is entirely true that our taste buds become dulled over time. That I don’t know. However, I am reasonably confident that biscuits made with fresh-milled flour and bacon fat taste somewhat different from biscuits made with a store-bought biscuit mix and skim milk.

### III.

This morning our communion trays will be filled with different kinds of bread. As these are distributed throughout the congregation, this variety of breads will give a visible reminder of the diverse peoples united as the people of God. As you see the variety of breads, please also see this as a visible reminder of the diverse peoples united within this congregation.

Recently I had the opportunity to meet someone who is not a member of our congregation; well, at least not yet a member of this congregation. I was introduced into the conversation as the new minister of this congregation. The person started to say that our congregation is very.....

Then there came a very, very long pause. A kind person breaks this awkward silence. I did not.

The silence was eventually broken when the person started again saying that this congregation has tremendous diversity; and, we do. Some see that as a weakness to be overcome. Others do not.

Acknowledging our broad-ranging diversity, and now entering our stewardship season, we now confront what may be this congregation’s greatest opportunity. This is a fair question to be asked –is it possible for a people as different and diverse as we are to come together as one, unified congregation? Is it possible for a group of people to come from different communities, and from every situation of life, representing every kind of family unit, and to voice every political opinion *and* to come together as a unified people of God?

As your pastor, I am convinced that we are confronting the single greatest opportunity that this church has ever known. The diversity of this congregation allows our work to reach into absolutely every corner of this island community. There is no place where we are unable to carry the good news of the Gospel, to demonstrate the love and grace of our God. In more than 165 years, this congregation has never known a moment such as this.

So, what now will we do with an opportunity such as this? Beginning today, and continuing over the next few weeks, we will be in our stewardship season. In these weeks, my hope is reflected in my three prayers for the coming weeks.

My first prayer is that each person in our church family will catch a vision of the life of this church. For some, there will be visions of opportunities to reach out into our community with much-needed practical help. For others, there may be new ideas for missions-related work, work to be done far from home. Still others will have a sense of the opportunities to strengthen our Sunday morning work and worship; perhaps even opportunities to support our choir with occasional instrumentalists.

My second prayer for this congregation is that we will all allow others to dream dreams that are different from our own. Our breadth of life experiences and opinions is not a weakness to be overcome unless we allow ourselves to be divided by our diversity. This prayer is also for the leadership of our congregation's elected leaders – the Session and the Trustees – and the congregation's willingness to follow their discernment.

My third prayer for this congregation is that we will find a way to come together to support a broad-ranging ministry that reflects the unity of this congregation. The full ministry of this congregation should reflect the broad diversity of this church. The full ministry of this congregation should also be inspired by the Holy Spirit, instructed by the word of God, and governed under the leadership of our Session.

Yes, there is diversity within this congregation and there are differences in breads around the world. Some years ago, the Texas Folklore Society received a paper on the folklore of Texas breads. The presenter, Ken Davis, was a former President of the Texas Folklore Society. He spoke of the dozens of different kinds of breads that are recorded in Texas history and lore. Among these is the traditional “pan de los muertos.”

“Many bakeries will sell pan de los muertos beginning November second, the day of the dead, and continue through Old Christmas, January 6.

This bread will be baked into a variety of shapes and sizes; including, bears, horses, cows, and perhaps even an owl. This bread is often placed on gravesites or at shrines.

Today, we celebrate a different kind of bread – the living bread. Jesus then said to his disciples, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.”

They said to him, “Lord, give us this bread always.”

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.”

Today each one of us will have an opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Communion Individually and together, we are to reach out with our hands – hands of varying size, shape, color, age and ability – to receive this bread of life. Though our many hands may look different, each and every one of our hands will reach up and touch the hand of God. That's the hand – the very hand of God – that holds us together.

END NOTES