

"THE BREAD OF CHRIST"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
August 3, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

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And I've often wondered where it came from and if there was a story behind those words....words that are meaningless to us today. Anyway, my research led me to discover that the first electric toaster came on the market around 1909. It toasted one side of the bread at a time and required constant vigilance. And when the toast was done, you quickly pulled the plug.

Now the first automatic electric toaster came along after the First World War, in 1919 and a man by the name of Charles Strite can be thanked for that, for he was a man sick and tired of burnt toast. Americans at first were somewhat skeptical of this new appliance, but as prices dropped the sales picked up and by 1930 there were over a million such toasters to be found in American homes...thanks in part to the introduction of sliced bread by WONDER. Apparently, before this, bread was sold in whole loaves and if you were going to enjoy your new toaster, you would benefit from sliced bread.

There were those who thought that sliced bread was just about the neatest and best thing in the world...back there in the late twenties and early thirties, so hence this phrase caught on...."That's the greatest thing since sliced bread!"

DEVELOPMENT

So much for sliced bread. Now today's Scripture lesson is about bread...unsliced bread, to be sure. For Jesus said,

"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. And if anyone eats of this bread...he will live forever!"

John even devotes the entire sixth chapter of his gospel to thi theme, that Christ is the bread of life....nourishment for our hungry souls and I might add, we would do well not to limit ourselves to just one slice, but to take the entire loaf.

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BREAD OF CHRIST IS UNIVERSAL

Jesus used different metaphors to define His ministry to us. This morning, let's consider this metaphor - BREAD - in order to discover the richness and uniqueness in this sixth chapter of John's Gospel.

Note, first, that the bread of Christ is universal. No one is excluded. Jesus says, "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever." In other words, there is no restriction on the kind of person Christ invites to His table. It

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I suppose it really makes little difference whether you say that Christ is the bread of life or that Christ is the banana of life. One reason the banner of Christ flies all over the world is that Christ is bread for the world....not European bread, or African bread, or American bread...or Middle Eastern bread. We worship a universal Christ. And yes, the Pope was right when he turned down millions for the Vatican by the bread manufacturers who wanted him to put the word, "Wonder" in to the Lord's Prayer. "Give us this day, our Wonder bread!"

BREAD OF CHRIST IS PERSONAL, TOO

this leads us to the second characteristic of the bread of Christ.

And, of course, that which is most universal is also most personal...and

It is intensely personal. That is, if we are all welcomed at Christ's table, then I am welcome at Christ's table and you are, too. We are all precious to Him. There are no second class citizens at His table, in God's Kingdom.

A ministerial colleague and a friend of many years had a serious accident sometime back that resulted in a long period of recovery which was marked by some bouts of depression. He began to wonder if he'd ever recover and while he was there he received in the mail a little package that contained a picture of a church he had once pastored. It showed a lighted sign on the corner of that church where his sermon titles and name were faithfully posted, week after week. The picture had been taken years before on a Sunday morning when my friend had been preaching on the topic, "The Lord Never Forgets". Now...whoever had been responsible for the lettering of the board had failed to complete the sermon title with quotation marks and his name came immediately below the centered title. It read simply, "The Lord Never Forgets"....and then his name.

That cheery note with that delightful photograph lifted his spirit and gave him a lift. The Lord never forgets, indeed....and put your name in there. Yes, remember that Christ never forgets any one of us. His love is at the same time universal and extremely personal. He is BREAD for a hungry world....bread for your life and for mine. Remember that as we commune together - universal and personal, but let's move on and let me remind you, too, that His bread is also communal.

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Please...don't get me wrong....people do have different needs. There are times for private communion with God...even in front of a computer screen, but it is clear, however, in this passage that Christ is talking about something more than the personal or the individualistic. As we read in this sixth chapter of John's Gospel, we hear Christ saying....

"I tell you the truth...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of His blood, you have no life in Him..."

We have very clear reference to this Holy Sacrament offered by the Church in His name. His name. The bread is personal, but it is also communal. It is the bread of God's people. And the strength we draw from feeding on the body of Christ is partially the result of our joining spirits as His disciples. We ARE the body of Christ. Search the scripture and you will agree that the Christian faith is not to be lived in isolation. It is not a faith for "loners". We are a sacred fellowship...with ties, strong ties, to each others lives. We are bonded together.

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The bread of Christ is universal, yet personal. It is personal, yet it is also communal and it is both time-sensitive and eternal.

THE BREAD OF CHRIST IS BOTH TIME-SENSITIVE AND ETERNAL

Time-sensitive. I like that phrase.

You know how it is, you to the super market and discover those little codes and lines that say something like this: "Sell before September 1st". Or, do not use "After October 1st, 1997". And we pay attention to those codes. We don't want sour milk or stale bread. Christ's bread is "time - sensitive" as well.

Scholars have pointed out to us that when Jesus told us to pray in the Lord's Prayer for daily bread, He used a word that is rather unique in all Greek literature. The word He used is not found in classical Greek and no where else in the New Testament does it appear. Some people even thought that perhaps Matthew made up the word when he wrote his version of the Gospel...until, that is, in 1947, when the Dead Sea scrolls were unearthed and there among all the shards of pottery, and the scraps of papyrus and parchment, was a shopping list....evidently a housewife's notes of what she need to purchase that day and every day in the

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Do you see the wonderful paradoxes that are emerging here? Universal, yet personal. Personal...and yet, communal. Time-sensitive and yet, eternal. Jesus is saying to us that even though this bread which He gives us is eternal, it must be gathered and consumed daily. And this brings us to the one final paradox. Stay with us a moment longer as we make this observation that the bread of Christ is to be kept, but it is also to be given away.

THE BREAD OF CHRIST IS TO BE KEPT AND IT IS TO BE GIVEN AWAY

This bread of Christ gives

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CLOSING

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PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness in these moments, O God. Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care. Those whom we mention by name: Ruth Frame, Eric deFreitas, Franklin Keysar, Carl Staaterman, B. G. Glover,

Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing and lifting presence. And point out markers on the trail for those who have lost their way.

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Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives where selfishness exists.

For the race, O God, is so very short....even at its longest.....and we would run it well, and also to Your glory. In the name and spirit of Him who is the bread of life, we now pray. Amen.

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Please...don't get me wrong....people do have different needs. There are times for private communion with God...even in front of a computer screen, but it is clear, however, in this passage that Christ is talking about something more than the personal or the individualistic. As we read in this sixth chapter of John's Gospel, we hear Christ saying....

"I tell you the truth...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of His blood, you have no life in Him..."

We have very clear reference to this Holy Sacrament offered by the Church in His name. His name. The bread is personal, but it is also communal. It is the bread of God's people. And the strength we draw from feeding on the body of Christ is partially the result of our joining spirits as His disciples. We ARE the body of Christ. Search the scripture and you will agree that the Christian faith is not to be lived in isolation. It is not a faith for "loners". We are a sacred fellowship...with ties, strong ties, to each others lives. We are bonded together. NYC "long ranger Christians" need to hear this and take note!

Remember Ben Weir, the Presbyterian missionary who was for such a long time a hostage in Lebanon. He has written and spoken movingly about worshipping while in captivity. Every Saturday night, he tells us, he would save a piece of bread from his supper meal, and on Sunday morning he would eat that piece of bread and feel so moved and connected up with other Christians...by this very sense of communing with God's people all over the world. Even in prison, he found a way to celebrate being in the presence of the Lord.

The bread of Christ is universal, yet personal. It is personal, yet it is also communal and it is both time-sensitive and eternal.

THE BREAD OF CHRIST IS BOTH TIME-SENSITIVE AND ETERNAL

Time-sensitive. I like that phrase.

You know how it is, you to the super market and discover those little codes and lines that say something like this: "Sell before September 1st". Or, do not use "After October 1st, 1997". And we pay attention to those codes. We don't want sour milk or stale bread. Christ's bread is "time - sensitive" as well.

Scholars have pointed out to us that when Jesus told us to pray in the Lord's Prayer for daily bread, He used a word that is rather unique in all Greek literature. The word He used is not found in classical Greek and no where else in the New Testament does it appear. Some people even thought that perhaps Matthew made up the word when he wrote his version of the Gospel...until, that is, in 1947, when the Dead Sea scrolls were unearthed and there among all the shards of pottery, and the scraps of papyrus and parchment, was a shopping list....evidently a housewife's notes of what she need to purchase that day and every day in the

agora - the market place. BREAD....before the time of preservatives, needed to be baked daily. Like manna, it could easily grow moldy the next day in arid climates, as well as damp ones. Thus Jesus says to us that we need to depend on him - daily. DAILY BREAD....yes!

Do you see the wonderful paradoxes that are emerging here? Universal, yet personal. Personal...and yet, communal. Time-sensitive and yet, eternal. Jesus is saying to us that even though this bread which He gives us is eternal, it must be gathered and consumed daily. And this brings us to the one final paradox. Stay with us a moment longer as we make this observation that the bread of Christ is to be kept, but it is also to be given away.

THE BREAD OF CHRIST IS TO BE KEPT AND IT IS TO BE GIVEN AWAY

This bread of Christ gives

us great strength and thus we do not want to lose it, or to misplace it. And at the same time Christ meant for us to give it away.

The History Channel shared a beautiful story with us recently that comes out of the pages of World War I. It was about a German soldier whose job it was to capture enemy soldiers for interrogation. Now, because of the nature of trench warfare at that time, it was extremely difficult for armies to cross the "No-Man's Land" between opposing front lines, but it was not so difficult for a single soldier to crawl across at dawn into an enemy trench position.

The armies of the First World War had experts who regularly did so to capture an enemy soldier who would then be brought back for questioning. This particular German expert had successfully completed such missions in the past and was sent out on another. And once again, he skillfully negotiated the area between the fronts and surprised a lone soldier...an enemy soldier...in his trench. The unsuspecting soldier, who had been eating at the time, was easily and quickly disarmed. This frightened captive with only a piece of bread in his hand then did what may have been the most important act of his life. He gave his enemy some of the bread that was in his hand and the German soldier was so affected by this gesture, by this gift of bread, that he could not complete his mission. He turned from his benefactor and climbed out of the trench and re-crossed the "no-man's land" empty handed to face the wrath of his superiors.

There is a message here for us all. Simply this: the bread of Christ is not to be hoarded, but rather it is to be shared - shared with the world...with others along the way...even as we pass through a "no-man's-land" in our daily rounds. Share the "bread" of His way, the "bread" of His word...the very bread of life with others.

CLOSING

This, then, is today's message. Hopefully, you'll try to remember all of these delightful paradoxes as we now prepare to receive the bread and the cup. The bread of Christ is UNIVERSAL, and yet PERSONAL. It is PERSONAL, yes...yet it is also COMMUNAL. It is time-sensitive and daily....but thank God, it is also ETERNAL. It is to be kept, but it is also to be GIVEN AWAY.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness in these moments, O God. Visit our sick with the quiet assurance of Your care. Those whom we mention by name: Ruth Frame, Eric deFreitas, Franklin Keysar, Carl Staaterman, B. G. Brown, Wendy Bowen, Daisy Herrick, Richie Gribben, Richard Laube..

Encircle the bereaved with Your warming, healing and lifting presence. And point out markers on the trail for those who have lost their way.

And douse with the cold waters of common sense any who might this very day be on the verge of some destructive action or some unhealthy and unwise decision.

Wrestle with us in the hidden corners of our lives where selfishness exists.

For the race, O God, is so very short....even at its longest.....and we would run it well, and also to Your glory. In the name and spirit of Him who is the bread of life, we now pray. Amen.