

Wheat

The Art and Architecture of Faith, Part 5

from the pulpit of
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by
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Exodus 16:2-4, 31-35

²The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. ³The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” ⁴Then the LORD said to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. ³¹The house of Israel called it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey.

³²Moses said, “This is what the LORD has commanded: ‘Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, in order that they may see the food with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you out of the land of Egypt.’”³³ And Moses said to Aaron, “Take a jar, and put an omer of manna in it, and place it before the LORD, to be kept throughout your generations.”³⁴ As the LORD commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the covenant, for safekeeping.³⁵ The Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a habitable land; they ate manna, until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.

John 6:35, 41-51

³⁵Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”⁴¹ Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.”⁴² They were saying, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?”⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not complain among yourselves.”⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day.⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught by God.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father.⁴⁷ Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.⁴⁸ I am the bread of life.⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died.⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die.⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

Ben Campbell Johnson was for many years professor of Evangelism at Columbia Seminary, and in his retirement, he found himself called deeply into interfaith dialogue, discovering the similarities among people of different faiths in our common quest to know God.

In his book entitled, *Something More*, Ben wrote about giving an address at a church conference, after which a young doctor came up and confided that he was discontent with his life. He had a happy family, a medical practice that provided plenty of income from which he gave generously to his church. He taught Sunday school and served as a church officer; he was widely respected in his community and seemed to lack for nothing.

With all the symbols of success and fulfillment attached to his life, this young man admitted to Ben, “There is still something missing...” In reflecting on this encounter, Ben Johnson celebrated the man’s hunger, writing: “To have a hunger, even a faint desire for ‘something more,’ is nothing to be ashamed of – it is a gift. The hunger for God, even an interest in God, is a rich treasure because it signals the presence of God already at work in your life.”¹

To have a hunger – it is a gift. What are you hungry for? I imagine each one of us is aware of some hunger, deep within ourselves, some longing for something more. This has been a week in our country when so many of us have found ourselves starving for more civility. Filled to the brim with brutish rancor, the pain of the MeToo movement, gender politics, and questions about fairness, we are hungry for a real sense of progress toward a more perfect union. And the daily news pushes the horrific global news aside, but World Communion calls us to look up and abroad. What else are we hungry for? More peace among races, religions and nations conflicts and divisions? More food for those who are really hungry for food. More refuge, shelter and safety, for the refugee? More calm after the storm? More of a sense of God’s presence in a world that is yearning for God’s intervention?

¹ Ben Campbell Johnson bio from his website, bencampbelljohnson.com, and story from *Something More*, 1993, P. 5.

Amid all the hungers that are represented across our worshipping congregation on this World Communion Sunday, I am reminded of the words of Henri Nouwen: “The beauty of the Lord’s Supper is precisely that it is the place where a vulnerable God invites vulnerable people to come together for a peaceful meal.”² It is a meal intended to satisfy the hungry heart.

Our gospel reading today comes from a chapter in John which began with the feeding of the five thousand, but by the time we get to our text, we are talking about a bread that feeds more than physical hunger. Feeding the crowd with the limited resources of a few loaves and fish, had reminded those who were gathered around Jesus of those ancient Israelites in the wilderness who were sustained on their journey by the daily gift of manna from heaven. The question of the starving Israelites back then in the Exodus account had been – “What is it?” which is the literal meaning of *manna* - “What is it?”

After Jesus’ miraculous feeding of the five thousand in the gospel of John, the question has become “Who are you?” Who are you, Jesus, doing the work of God? Both the Old and New Testament stories are about the same God, *and* the similar circumstances of God’s children who are hungry for food and then something more than food. The difference is that in Jesus of Nazareth, God is up to something new... offering hope... the gift of eternal life is present in the bread that Jesus shares.

When we come to the Lord’s Table, we are fed by the Bread of Life so that we can share that life with the world. Part of that sharing is a call to serve those who are hungry for food, and then to serve those who hunger for something more than food. The problem of physical hunger is real, and it is huge. The famine in Yemen, for example, is so severe that the United Nations estimated just last week that two-thirds of Yemen’s population of 29 million people do not know where their next meal is coming from.

Just last week, a study came out of Temple University detailing the problem of hunger among college students. In community colleges across the

² HenriNouwen.org

nation, one in three students experiences food insecurity, and fourteen percent are homeless. Even in some of our country's most prestigious institutions there are students who worry about food.³

With Pastor Rebecca's leadership, this congregation is partnering with other churches and Mainline Reform Temple to help address food insecurity in our immediate area. Ten percent of the students in Lower Merion Township's public schools are on free or reduced lunch, which means there may not be enough food at home over weekends and during the summer. We who hunger for something are here being nourished to serve those who are hungry for food, and in our serving we might find some satisfaction for our own hunger, our hunger for something more than food.

United Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon, has written: "When Jesus compares himself to manna...when he calls himself the Bread of Life, he surely implies that you cannot receive the gift that he offers without receiving it through sharing. In the midst of a famine, if a person comes upon a piece of bread... and eats it, that is a meal. But if a person comes upon a piece of bread and takes the bread, gives thanks for the bread, and then shares half of it with someone who has none, that is a *sacrament*. As for me," Willimon goes on to say, "I am grateful that when Jesus came proclaiming the advent of his kingdom, he did not begin with sermons about atonement, justification, redemption or any other big, abstract, high-sounding words. He began by pointing to our stomachs, to that gnawing, unsatisfied, emptiness within, and he invited us to dinner. Then, having fed us, he charged us to feed others. In spite of our inadequacies, cowardice, greed, and fears, he told us, 'You give them something to eat...'"⁴

If you are hungry for something more than food, there is hope in the bread because Christ is present in our Communion. It nourishes us to share what we can. If you are hungry for more civility – then befriend someone with whom you differ, and try to understand a different point of view. If you are

³ Susan Snyder, "College Students, but Hungry, Homeless," Philadelphia Inquirer, 9/28/18, p. B2.

⁴ Will Willimon, *Sunday Dinner: The Lord's Supper and the Christian Life*, p. 72.

hungry for the ache of the world, be generous in your sharing. If you are hungry for peace in your life, make room for the Peace of Christ to rule in your heart.

This communion points to new life beyond this life; then, filling us with home it empowers us to be new creations. Our congregation – at large – only gathers as a whole church family around the Communion Table once a month or so. But we have a beautiful, ever present, visual reminder of how we are nurtured at this table and then, sent to serve.

The Harry Bertoia sculpture called “Wheat” is on the balcony level of the Ministries Center, given in loving memory of Lois Moon. So accustomed are we to passing it by, most lose sight of its significance. Harry Bertoia was an Italian-born American artist, sculptor and furniture designer. He learned how to weld in the 1940’s in California, and during World War Two he welded airplanes as a contribution to the war effort. He later studied at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan, and ultimately settled near Allentown, Pennsylvania, where he created works of art now in museums, as well as airports, banks, universities and businesses.

His public sculptures are displayed throughout the United States – including his nearby fountain in front of the Woodmere Museum in Chestnut Hill. He was selected to create the memorial piece for the Marshall University football team in West Virginia after that tragic plane crash took the lives of seventy-five people, including the whole team in 1970, recounted in the movie *We Are Marshall*.

Bertoia took his inspiration from nature, and most of his sculptures move. They move as tree branches move in a breeze, inviting the observer to move. Harry Bertoia rarely signed his work. He said, he felt his gift to the universe needed no person’s mark upon it to be appreciated or interpreted. And so Harry Bertoia’s gift to this congregation is the permanent installment of *Wheat*, a reminder of the elements of communion, a sculpture that moves, wind-blown, reminiscent of the Living Bread of Jesus Christ who moves us into the world to serve those who hunger for bread and those who hunger for

more than bread. One of the ancient prayers of our Christian tradition reads: *Merciful God, as grains of wheat scattered upon the hills were gathered together to become one bread, so in like fashion let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.*

Today with Christ's global family, like grains of wheat scattered across the globe, we are gathered by Christ, the Bread of Life, to be the living Body of Christ. Whatever your hunger is, there is hope in the bread. And that hope is intended to move us into the world to serve.

AMEN.