

August 15, 2021

The Reverend Mark Mares

John 6: 51-58

1 Kings 2: 10-12, 3: 3-14

On Wednesday morning, before walking upstairs here at the church for our staff meeting, I talked with our wonderful welcome center staff, Pat. I was reflecting with her how much I love storms during the summer, especially Michigan storms. I even said, “I hope we get a storm later today!” Needless to say, I didn’t quite feel the same after losing power at our home for several days, because of a storm that afternoon. Later, I joked with my wife, Jenna, I don’t think I feel the same way about Michigan storms.

In all seriousness, many are still without power. And this is a very serious thing, because we rely on power so much. Here in the West, power feels like something that never runs out. But it isn’t something that lasts forever.

You see, power is created – it has a source. It comes from some place. The power that lights up my house, runs the air conditioner, keeps the refrigerator on, it comes from a power plant, and that power can come from a number of other sources, ultimately, perhaps mostly fueled by the sun. And for us in the Christian Faith tradition, we ultimately believe that the sun was created by God, so, it is God who is the source of all things.

People without power know that power has a source and without that source, there is hunger, cold, abuse, and death. Especially in our modern age, being without power can bring devastation. I think of those in Haiti after the Earthquake that rippled through – not only was it deadly, but the damage it’s done will leave many vulnerable, and susceptible to the problems that come from not having power. Tropical Storm Grace and Fred are also doing damage to many folks, and their power sources.

Throughout time, people have struggled to survive, from the elements, from each other, from the unexpected. In ancient times, people relied heavily on the Kings whom ruled them, for their survival. Kings were ultimately a source of power. The King’s wisdom, their judgements, their knowledge, went forth from their commands on the throne, like electricity from a power plant. Everyone was connected to their king.

In our passage from first Kings, we encounter the death of Solomon’s father, King David. As Solomon is preparing to take on the throne, and continue the legacy of his father. He makes a sacrifice and offers a prayer to God. And there the Lord appears to Solomon and asks him what he would like.

Solomon first responds acknowledging the humility, righteousness, and faithfulness of his father. And instead of asking for wealth, and honor, he asks for wisdom. There’s great power in Solomon’s request. Solomon knows the task before him is daunting, he likens himself to a child, before the mighty nation chosen by God.

It’s almost as if there is fear in Solomon’s prayer. Solomon, who already shows wisdom in his request, echoes the wisdom literature:

“Give instruction to the wise and they will become wiser still;

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teach the righteous and they will gain in learning.” (Proverbs 9:9)¹

Kings certainly had a lot of responsibility. Solomon knows this. Not only were they the source of power for their people, they were the source of their survival. They were their people’s provider. Chief among a King’s responsibilities, was to supply food for their people, and to wage either an offensive or defensive war whenever the King felt their people were threatened.

In the ancient world, there was a deep connection between war and food; it’s even implicit in the structure of the Hebrew language. “The word for ‘waging war’, nilcham; nifal – passive/reflexive, and the word for ‘bread’, lechem, have the same root letters.” I’m indebted to one of my professors, Dr. Tom Boogaart, for noting this connection, “*Suggests that the people of Israel understood war fundamentally as a means of ‘securing bread for oneself’*”²

King Solomon certainly understands the responsibility that comes with being the king of a nation. He watched as his father held that same responsibility. Imperfect as David was, and as Solomon would be in his own reign, he learned a few lessons about the throne.

For those in leadership, there is a tension between humility and confidence, finitude and limitless capacity, the gifts we have and the gifts we have yet to acquire.³ King Solomon, like all rulers and leaders of nations, doesn’t live up to the promise of his prayer. His story, like so many of ours, is imperfect. Solomon fails again and again, but perhaps that’s because the power Solomon leads with is the kind of power that kingdoms, empires, and rulers have used and abused throughout time.

In our passage from the Gospel of John, we continue hearing the reflections from Jesus on bread, we have heard over the last several weeks. All of these reflections come after the miracle of feeding five thousand. Jesus, here, challenges the crowd of people “*to step toward an even deeper trust in God, and then declares, ‘I am the bread of life,’ the one who has come to provide the nourishment of living wisdom, the teachings that lead toward a fully human life well lived.*”⁴

In the way that only Jesus can, he turns the conventional wisdom upside down. The people Jesus is talking to know the deep undercurrents of what it means to “secure bread for oneself.” They would have associated sovereign power with this ONE who could multiply the loaves and fish. But this sovereign power upends what power looks like.

You see the king provides. And central to our faith, to the life of our worship, are the two sacraments of table and bath. And it’s at this TABLE, where God, in Christ, redefines power and upends our understanding of a kingdom. The king provides. And this table is overflowing. Literally, today the bread is overflowing here. We don’t have to fight for scarce resources here because at this table, food and drink are freely given. “This providence reconfigures the boundaries between people and reconstitutes relationships.”⁵ Here, “Enemies become friends. They sit as family around a table.”

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-20-2/commentary-on-1-kings-210-12-33-14>.

² Dr. Tom Boogaart, [Touching the Altar of God: The Old Testament for Christian Worship](#).

³ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-20-2/commentary-on-1-kings-210-12-33-14>.

⁴ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/progressive-christian-communion>.

⁵ Ibid, Boogaart.

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Ultimate power in the Kingdom of God is not a sword, but a table, not a well-planned campaign, but a well-planned meal, not cut throats, but full stomachs. Because the table is always full.

You know what it's like. You sit down at the table. The server brings water to you and your friends or family. And then, almost always, the next thing that happens—the basket of bread is plucked down in the middle of your table. Sometimes with butter. Sometimes with herbed butter. Sometimes with olive oil and maybe a little garlic or parmesan cheese. Sometimes, you finish the bread and the server will bring back another basket! We are so accustomed to this ritual we hardly think about it. Bread at the center of our tables.

In my family, sometimes it was freshly fried homemade tortilla chips, or simply tortillas wrapped in a towel. We dive in and take our hunks of bread, dip them in the oil or spread them with butter—or grab our chips and dip them in the salsa, or put some queso fresco and wrap our tortillas around them—chatting the whole while, catching up, getting settled. Enjoying the company.

I'm grateful that this bread is here, even on a day when we aren't having communion. Because with this bread here, you notice, what we've always known. The bread sits here too. Always plenty. We're so accustomed to this, so accustomed, we hardly think about it. Bread in the center of our tables.

Bread is something so simple but also something so necessary. It connects us as human beings. It is a staple, that not only connects us to the earth and creation that it comes from, but it connects us to those who've come before us: Bread in the wilderness. Manna that came down from heaven. Leavened bread and the unleavened bread, depending on the religious season. Gluten-free for those who need it. And it gets plucked down in the middle of our tables. And it is always in the middle of our communion table.

Bread connects us. We need it. We share it.

If we look at Jesus' life – his reign on earth, the ministry of kin-ship he lived—we witness a different kind of kingdom and rule, one shaped by this very table.

We see in Jesus, a love that knows no bounds, a lamb sacrificed for the sins of all people, a towel wrapped around a waist, washing dirty feet. We see Jesus talking with those he shouldn't talk with—like the Samaritan woman at the well—and healing those he shouldn't heal at a time he shouldn't heal them—like the man blind from birth who Jesus healed on the Sabbath.

In Jesus, we see a King, hanging out with those he shouldn't hang out with, pardoning those he shouldn't pardon, having mercy on those who don't deserve mercy, and loving those imperfect people he shouldn't love. We see someone going into the places where he will be defiled and instead making them the places of God's holy reign. We see a man, who sees a crowd of hungry people, and doesn't tell them to go get food, but feeds them – offers them bread. In Jesus, we see someone who invites us to a table where there is always plenty.

This is the reign of God—the miracle of love, that meets us in the ordinary gifts, of bread and cup, the power that gives us life, that fuels our very being,

it is confounding,
surprising,
imaginative,
expansive,
for you,
for me,
for them,
for all.

Jesus says, I am the bread of life. And when we eat this bread, we aren't just nourished and fed. Though we are. But we're filled by a power that flows through this table, that's tapped into a different kind of kin-dom, one that is often vulnerable, gentle and unspectacular.

At a time when many are still without electrical power, when wars and the rumors of wars persist, when natural disasters and fires threaten, when the vulnerability of life hangs in the balance, remember the compassion of Jesus that meets us here at this table.

It is God's compassion for all of us—we who are hungry for so many things; food, bread included. Remember Jesus' compassion, because it is compassion for you and for me, hurting people all of us. Remember the compassion, receive it with thankfulness, and share it generously.

And as we do so, may our prayer echo Solomon's:

*O God, give us wisdom.
O God, give us discernment.
O God, help us to be faithful.
O God, give us the power to love.*

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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