

“Breaking Bread”
February 25, 2007

Psalm 25:1-10
Luke 4:1-13

Ten years ago this spring, I experienced an unexpected, inexplicable call to ministry. I was sitting in our living room in Northampton, Massachusetts, minding my own business, when the words, “Go into the ministry,” impressed themselves on my heart.

The twists and turns and ins and outs of the nearly nine years between that startling experience and being ordained last April are many, and I, at least, think many of them make for a great story. But it’s just one set of twists and turns that I want to share with you this morning, and it’s this.

When that voiceless voice, that mysterious knowing, came into my heart and mind, I was not a member of any church, and I most definitely did not consider myself a Christian. To top it off, I didn’t think I knew *anyone* who was a member of a church, Christian or otherwise. As a result, I was very slow to tell anyone what I had experienced, and, even after I started talking about it with a few close friends, I didn’t have a connection with anyone who knew about the ways of “church” or “ministry.”

Because of all that, I thought I had to put all this together on my own, so I came up with a plan. I decided that, since I wasn’t a Christian, I must be a Unitarian. Logically enough, I thought, I began attending the Unitarian Universalist church in Northampton. At that time, it was a thriving, growing congregation led by a dynamic, passionate, compassionate minister. Her sermons were moving and the congregation was friendly enough, but I left each Sunday morning service missing God. I was missing God because the minister was a secular humanist and God had no place in her preaching or her teaching.

After several weeks, I stopped attending those Sunday morning services and, for a while, couldn’t get past thinking and feeling, “Uh oh. What do I do now?” At some point during this time, a woman I knew in Alcoholics Anonymous told me I should check out the church she and her partner attended. The church was both Unitarian and Congregational/UCC. Among other things, that combination of identities meant that it was a decidedly *Christian* church. I told this woman that I’d think about going, but I knew in my heart I was in no hurry.

I was in no hurry in part because Christmas was coming soon, and that time of year just seemed certain to be too *Christian* for me. So I waited Christmas out and then started to think a little more seriously about going to her church. I was *still* in no hurry, though – until I realized that if I waited too long, it would be Easter, and then the “Christian thing” would be way over the top. That was just too scary to contemplate, so one Sunday late in February, 1998, I made my way into the sanctuary of the First Church of Deerfield.

I was apprehensive, a little wary, but I told myself that it would be all right, because I had been smart enough to sneak in *between* Christmas and Easter. Well, of course, the cosmic, sacred joke was on me. The first joke was that trying to avoid Jesus and the Christian-ness of that church was like my trying to avoid being tall – not possible,

period. But the joke got even better, because, with all my strategizing about the “right” time to go to the Deerfield church, what I managed to do was get there at the beginning of Lent, and the Lenten journey was all about Jesus. The Lenten journey was all about why and how so many people had encountered God in and through Jesus, and the Lenten journey was about why Jesus’ words, “Follow me,” have been so compelling and so challenging throughout the last two thousand years.

From that very first Sunday, I was hooked. I felt invited and claimed by God in ways I had never experienced before, and I was at every single worship service at the First Church of Deerfield for the next two and a half years.

I wanted to share that part of my story with you this morning to let you know that, if you’re uneasy with Christianity or Jesus or both, I can truly relate. I can relate to the discomfort or wariness, but I also want to invite you on this Lenten journey. Embrace the journey, so you can discover what gifts it may hold for you.

The words I heard that first Sunday in Lent nine years ago included the words from the Gospel of Luke I read, here, a few moments ago – the story of Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness.

In all three synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness immediately follows his baptism by John in the River Jordan and the Holy Spirit’s descending upon him. This is one of the stories that the earliest Christians told and retold, trying to describe and explain how they had experienced the fullness of the living, loving, healing God in Jesus. This is a story that tries to describe the transformation that occurs in a human life when the Spirit of God comes to dwell fully in that life. This is a story that tries to describe just who and what those early Christians encountered in Jesus. It is a story that tries to describe what *we* might be like, if we, too, allowed the Holy Spirit to anoint and dwell within us.

In this morning’s reading, the first test for Jesus comes after he has been fasting for 40 days. The devil challenges him to prove he is the Son of God, by turning a stone into a loaf of bread. Jesus responds, “It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

Like each of the exchanges in this story between Jesus and the devil, this bit of conversation is rich in meaning and interpretive possibilities. For now, I’d like to offer just two of those possibilities. The first is that Jesus simply brushes aside the taunt, “If you are the Son of God, *prove* it.” He doesn’t fall into the trap of using the fullness of the Spirit’s presence in him to glorify *himself*. The second is that Jesus refuses to act as if his physical hunger, his desire in that moment for food, empowers him to treat another part of God’s creation as something that exists *only* to satisfy his needs and desires. Even though Jesus was famished, at the end of the story, the stone is still a stone. Its stoneness is still intact, and it retains its place in God’s creation. It remains something that has value in its own right, not something that has value because it can be put to human use.

The devil then shows Jesus the kingdoms of the world and offers to give them all to Jesus if he would only worship the devil. Jesus responds, “It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only the Lord.’” Given the chance to rule the earth – and, remember, this could have been a chance to rule the world in love and mercy – Jesus says, “No.” Having been claimed and blessed by the fullness of the Spirit of God, Jesus resists the temptation of believing that he should now use that blessing to act independently of God and to turn his back on the God who has blessed him.

Finally, in this story, the devil tries once more to goad Jesus into glorifying himself – “If you are the Son of God, prove it” – and tries this time by urging Jesus to throw himself from the top of the temple. Once again, Jesus refuses to be goaded, and he responds, “It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” Jesus refuses to use the fullness of God’s presence and blessedness to prove a point, and he refuses play the game of Chicken with God. He trusts God’s promises, he trusts God’s care and protection, and he rests in that trust.

From the earliest days of the Christian faith, our brothers and sisters have been saying that God was present in and through Jesus in a palpable, yet nearly indescribable way. To try to describe the indescribable, they repeated what they remembered of his words, and they told stories about his life and ministry. The stories try to convey what it looks like when the Spirit of God dwells as fully in a human life as it did in Jesus’ life. Through the story of the temptation of Jesus, we hear that when we allow God to dwell fully within us, we become people who do not need to prove ourselves; we become people who use our gifts, talents, and blessings for God’s purposes, not our own; and we become people who trust God’s promises of care and protection.

This is the kind of person Jesus’ earliest followers saw in him, and this is the kind of person Jesus’ followers *continue* to see in him. This is the Jesus who says, “Follow me” in a life of faith, love, and service. This is the Jesus whose life, love, and ministry we seek to celebrate *and join* when we break the bread of communion with him and with one another.

We are told that on the night he was betrayed, Jesus gave his disciples bread and wine and said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” And so we celebrate communion, both in remembrance of Jesus and in the hope that we, too, will be become people in whom the Holy Spirit can dwell fully. We share this bread and this cup, so that we can be transformed into people who can resist the temptation to focus only on our own survival, our own needs and desires. We share this bread and this cup, so that we can become people who resist the temptation to forget that our gifts and talents do not reveal our own greatness, but reveal the greatness as their creator. We share these things, so that we can reveal and serve the God who longs for us to use our gifts and talents to love and heal the world. Jesus urges us to share this bread and this cup, to do this in remembrance of him, so that we can be nurtured into people who are guided by *God’s* vision for the world.

Let us now join him and one another at this table of blessing and grace.

Amen.

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First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
February 25, 2007