

Jesus at Prayer: Blessing
Luke 9:12-17
March 1, 2009

We are here today because we call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ. Everything we do is intended to draw us closer to him and closer to God – our study, our worship, our outreach, our nurture – all of it, part of our journey towards God. A significant part of our journey of faith is prayer. And yet, prayer is something that doesn't come easily to some of us. We'd rather have someone else do it for us; or we shoot a quick "arrow" prayer up at heaven as we go on our way "Help me, Jesus!" "Thank you, God!" And there's nothing wrong with arrow prayers – they may be the most significant and most effective and essential of our prayers – certainly they are the most genuine!

There is a great market out there for people who want to know more about prayer – all kinds of "how to" books to make us – in the typical American way – bigger, better, and more successful pray-ers. But there's not much that I've found on Jesus at prayer. When did Jesus pray? Why did he pray? Where was he when he prayed? What did he pray about? Why should we care? We spend a lot of time learning about Jesus when he is preaching, or teaching, or healing, being born and dying. But what do we know about him praying? During these next weeks of Lent, I hope we'll get to know more about this aspect of Jesus' life because prayer was the foundation upon which and from which Jesus did everything else. And perhaps there's a lesson there for each of us.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent and communion Sunday. So it seems appropriate to begin by looking at Jesus praying before he feeds the multitudes who have followed him to a deserted place and who have been taught and healed and cared for by Jesus and the disciples throughout the day. But now the day is dying, the evening is coming on and they are in a remote location, a deserted place, there are no McDonalds nearby, no convenience stores open, no Holiday Inns. The only thing to do, the disciples conclude is to send folks on home before dark; they're hungry and they need to get back in time for supper, if indeed, they have a home to go to and a supper waiting for them.

But Jesus has another idea, "You give them something to eat," he says. And they respond quickly that their provisions are small, only five loaves and two fish – they'd have to go somewhere to buy food and bring it back to feed the 5,000 who have gathered there that day. So, Jesus has them seat the people in an orderly fashion, and he takes the five loaves and two fish.

What Jesus does next is to pray. He looks up to heaven and he blesses – not the bread – the way we do when we give our modern day blessings! We focus on the food – you can look at us and tell that we focus on food! We eulogize the food—"Bless this food to our use and us to thy service," we say! Jesus and his contemporaries, however, focused on God in their blessing before a meal. They focused on the source of the meal; the giver of the food. And so Jesus took the bread and then would have said, "Blessed are you Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth." And then, after Jesus blessed God, he broke the bread and gave it to his disciples to share with the multitudes.

Does this language sound familiar – take, bless, break, give? It is the exact language used in all four gospel stories of Jesus' feeding the multitudes. It is the same language used in describing Jesus in his last meal with his disciples; it is the language used in the story of Jesus on the road to Emmaus after his resurrection. Even though the gospel writers don't agree on a lot of things, they agree on this: these four words – take, bless, break, give – these words are the

language of the Eucharist, the language of holy communion, of the Lord's Supper – the language we will share together in a few minutes when we come to this table. It is the language that Christians in the late first century were already using when they met to eat together and to remember Jesus. Paul, in 1st Corinthians, reminds his friends of that story, the tradition, that had been handed down to him by others – that at his last meal with his disciples, Jesus took bread, gave thanks to God, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples.

So this story of feeding the multitude is a Lord's table story, a communion story, and it uses this established four-fold language of our liturgy. Now true enough, we have bread and fish, not bread and wine in this particular story. But Luke's listeners would have heard that word "fish", which in Greek is "ichthus" and recognized it as an acronym for the words, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. And when Luke mentions the collection of the broken pieces, they would have remembered, "This is my body, broken for you."

I think what Luke is trying to tell us here, in using liturgical words to share a story about feeding hungry people, is that feeding the hungry in God's sight is as holy as our communion table. In the first century, the two activities weren't separated – a love feast accompanied communion. Everybody got together and ate together and remembered what Jesus had said and done as they passed the bread and the cup around their tables during the course of their meal. We've separated the two – so soon we will share the bread and cup here in the sanctuary, and then go downstairs for our fellowship meal together.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, scolds them for sharing the Lord's supper "unworthily," but he doesn't mean that they are in a state of sin, or that they are not good enough to sit at the table. He is disappointed that the more wealthy of those present, those who can get to the meal first, are stuffing themselves, and not leaving anything for the slaves and the servants who follow Christ, and who will come later after their required chores for the day are finished. They are thinking about themselves and not the good of the community. "So," he admonishes, "my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another." (1Cor 10:33). In Paul's eyes it is the wealthy who are more susceptible to unworthy behavior, not the poor, and he has to remind them that the poor among them deserve the same respect and the same opportunity to share at the table as they do.

Every day we experience a kind of communion downstairs. Now Mary might tell you that there are some folks who eat "unworthily" as Paul describes it. But mostly, it's a love feast, where everyone is welcome, and where regardless of social status, economic condition, race, age, gender a guest can find hospitality and welcome. I have come to think of Our Daily Bread as the Lord's Table. And I think we find Christ at that table. Now, I know that we, in serving others hope to be Christ to them – we hope to take bread, bless it, break it, and share it with whoever comes our way. But in a very real sense, just as we try to be Christ for our guests, they in turn are Christ to us.

I have told you before about my experience in the first few weeks after I came to Oconee Street and Our Daily Bread. I was standing around in the dining area feeling out of place, wondering what I should be doing, awkward and self conscious, when a guest approached me, and asked me if I were new there, to which I responded "yes." He asked me if I were doing community service, which in my then incredibly naïve state I assumed meant serving the community, and I was pleased that he could recognize that I was there to do good. I felt superior; I felt in charge. I felt like I was the dispenser of the good news. I was being Christ to others. And then he smiled and said, "This is a good place, and they'll be good to you here; your time will go by quickly," and then he walked away to his table to eat with his friends. Well,

when I got over my chagrin at realizing he thought I'd broken the law and was doing court appointed Community Service, I realized that this nameless man had been Christ to me. There I was thinking I was the host, but he was the host and I was the guest. I thought I was welcoming people to my place, but he welcomed me to his place. I thought I was showing the love of God by being there, but he showed me the love of God by welcoming me, encouraging me and not judging me. This was a significant and transformative experience in my life. I will never forget it. It changed who I am and who I understand Christ to be. Every day holy things happen downstairs in the room right under our feet just as much as they happen here in this sanctuary.

Jesus looked to heaven and blessed God. And then all kind of good things—wonderful things—miraculous things happened. Do we bless God when we pray? Or do we just ask God to bless us? Think about it – it makes a difference.

Rev. Lisa Caine
Oconee Street UMC
Athens, GA