

“Let Us Go Now to the Banquet!”

Sermon: Year A, Pentecost 19, Proper 23, Lectionary 28

Texts: Isaiah 25:1–9, Psalm 23, Matthew 22:1–14

Preached: October 15, 2017 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from the God who sets a table for all creation, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who is both host and feast. AMEN

I had a surprise invitation yesterday morning. Out in Elgin, my former congregation, Christ the Lord, has joined forces with Zion Lutheran Church, St. Mary’s Catholic Church, and Congregation Kneseth Israel, the local synagogue, to bring to town two volumes of the St. John’s Bible. If you’re not familiar with this project, it is a complete hand-lettered Bible, lavishly illustrated with beautifully painted and gilded images, the first manuscript Bible to be produced in the 500 years since the introduction of the printing press. The work is astonishingly beautiful. It is the creation of a team of six scribes and countless artists, and was commissioned by St. John’s Abbey in Minnesota. Now that it is finished, a very limited number of facsimile volumes are traveling the world. The congregations I mentioned—Lutheran, Catholic, and Jewish—got together and paid for two of the volumes, the Pentateuch (first five books of the Old Testament) and Gospels, to come to Elgin, where they are on display at the library. It’s an amazing cooperative effort as Lutherans and Catholics in town are observing the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation and are seeking to find ways to reconcile with one another, and as a Jewish congregation partners with Christians for the good of the neighbor.

This weekend, the Pentateuch volume was carried to Congregation Kneseth Israel, coinciding with Simchat Torah, the festival celebrated this weekend in which people rejoice in the Torah, the word of God given to God’s people. The Torah scroll is danced through the assembly with great joy. (Our service has a faint echo of that practice as the Gospel book is processed to the center of the assembly.) Rabbi Margaret Frisch-Klein sent me a Facebook message yesterday morning to alert me to the fact the volume would be there for Saturday morning Sabbath worship, and inviting me to come join them. I quickly shaved and went to join them. The service was long—two and a half hours—as the cycle of reading the Torah was starting again, and the reading included the entire first portion of Genesis, all the way from Creation up to the Flood. I was touched that Rabbi Margaret called on me to help voice the prayers.

I was even more touched as I was invited to stay for the Kiddush and Motzi, literally, the blessings over bread and wine. “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who creates the fruit of the vine” and “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” All drink, then eat the challah and, and then partake in a wonderful spread of delicious foods. In many ways, it was like our coffee hour, multiplied by a factor of 10 or so. People made sure I enjoyed a shot of bourbon, then ensured that I fill a plate with lox and hummus, beautifully arranged fresh fruit, bread pudding hot from the oven, popcorn drizzled with caramel...it was a feast, and they were gracious hosts. We sat around banquet tables enjoying one another’s company, continuing our conversation in the sweetness of Sabbath rest and peace.

At one point in the morning, the rabbi and I had been talking with one of the congregants as we looked at the St. John’s Bible volume, discussing the translation of the first verses of Genesis, where it describes God’s Spirit, God’s breath, God’s wind—all of which are possible translations of the Hebrew word *ruach*—that moves over the face of the waters of Creation. We marveled a bit at the significance of Lutherans and Catholics and Jews coming together in fellowship and cooperation in ways that would have been unimaginable even a few short years before. Rabbi Margaret pointed out that Luther was “not so great about the Jews.” My cheeks burned a bit as I acknowledged that he in fact said horrible things about Jews, words and attitudes that later were used in justifying the Holocaust, words that, thank God, we in the Evangelical Lutheran Church have repudiated and asked forgiveness for.

It was amazing to see that volume of the Bible. It was even more amazing for me, though, to sit around a table, feasting and drinking, as a visible representative of a faith that has oppressed our Jewish sisters and brothers, and yet, gathered around the word of God and prayer, and then around a banquet table, those deep wounds of the past were forgotten for the moment. And in that eating, in that drinking, I grasped the vision of Isaiah from the passage we just heard, of a feast that God lays out to which all peoples are invited, a rich feast dripping with fat and marrow and flooded with rich wine, a feast at which God’s own self wipes away the tears and pains of the past, and feeds God’s people with extravagance.

Banquets are where it's at in scripture, both in the Hebrew scriptures and Christian scriptures. Eating and drinking, feasting, those are the images of the fulfillment of God's plan for humanity. God is described as setting a table for God's people, but it's a table to which all are invited, both friend and foe, because it is at the table, eating and drinking, that it becomes possible to reconcile our differences. It is in the rich feeling of being served and sated that people can truly focus on those things that are "true, and honorable, and just, and pure, and pleasing, and commendable, and excellent and worthy of praise." Our hungers can cause us to ignore those things, or to struggle with one another for resources, to hoard for ourselves the best, grasping at the things we think we need only for ourselves. But it is in wine poured out, in bread broken and shared, that we can find the peace and harmony that we so desire, and that God desires for us.

Week after week, we gather around this banquet table, giving thanks to the God who creates the fruit of the vine and causes bread to spring from the ground. Week after week, we break and eat the bread, we bless and drink the cup, and we do so in a mystical acting out of the great Messianic feast to come. This table is a banquet table, laden with good things, a banquet to which all have been invited, good and bad alike. You know, we get hung up on Jesus' difficult words in the parable we heard, worrying about who might get cast out of the banquet into the "outer darkness," and we overlook the Good News that in spite of any insults or mistreatment, any wrongs done, the Ruler still sends his servants out to invite everyone to the banquet, because he wants the feasting hall to be filled. And you may not have noticed, but each week, we take what remains of the loaf we share in Eucharist and place it on the serving table in the Fellowship Hall alongside the delights of coffee hour, as a reminder that the meal does not end here in this room. All of our eating together, all of our drinking together, becomes in some way an extended sharing in the sacramental meal. In the early church, people would divide up and take home with them the bread and wine that remained from the Eucharist so that their everyday eating at home could continue to be a part of the feasting they experienced as the gathered Body of Christ, and so that those who could not gather with them could nonetheless be fed. It's a beautiful idea.

Over the past couple of years, we've been emphasizing here at Immanuel that we have a "faith that feeds." That is central to my understanding of the Gospel. Jesus built his ministry around eating and drinking, and around making sure that others were fed, both in body and in soul. Jesus fed the crowds. He sat down to dinner with the Pharisees, even though they were often antagonistic toward one another. He served his friends meals, blessing the bread and the cup, then feasting with them as he himself served them. His post-resurrection appearances almost always involve meals. He becomes recognizable to the disciples when he takes a loaf of bread and breaks it so he can serve them. His last command to Simon Peter is "feed my sheep," words uttered after Jesus himself has prepared and served his friends a breakfast of grilled fish and bread on the beach of the Sea of Galilee. In Acts, it says of the first Christians that "every day they continued to meet together in the Temple courts, and broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." And the first concerted action Jesus' followers took as the church after Pentecost was to provide meals for the widows among them. Later they gathered for meals they called "love feasts." Eating and drinking is not just about filling bellies. It is an act of community, an act of love. It binds us together.

When we gather for coffee hour, when we serve breakfast at Café Immanuel, when we serve at the Soup Kettle or Hilda's place, when we have a potluck together, when we have a pop-up restaurant, when we offer food at the Farmers' Market, when we collect food in a food drive, when we gather in one another's homes, when we gather around our own tables, we are living out the Great Feast. Have you ever thought of your everyday meals as in some way being a mystical sharing in the feast that God is preparing for all peoples? I have a personal practice when I take a first sip of wine to pray that blessing, "Blessed are you, O God, Ruler of the universe..." and then again with my first bite of bread. When we see Eucharist as not only a meal together, but as a model for all our eating and drinking, it changes the character of the everyday.

We are here to be fed. But we are fed and nourished for a purpose: to go out into the world proclaiming the Good News that there is a banquet to which all are invited, a banquet at which we can sit down and reconcile with one another, no matter what ugliness we experience in the world. It is a model for how enemies can be brought together. When we eat together, when we serve one another, when we welcome the stranger as guest, we participate in one of those realities that is, but is still not yet. Our feasting is imperfect, but it nonetheless shows forth the hope of what is to be, and in the process helps realize that future. So, sisters and brothers, eat and drink your fill, serve your neighbor from that same bounty, and realize that it is God's own self who provides and serves so that all may be fed. Thanks be to God! AMEN.