

Lent Service Message

Christ Our Emanuel Lutheran Church

March 9th, 2016

I am happy and grateful for the opportunity to be here at Christ Our Emanuel Lutheran Church to share just a few thoughts. I was raised in Ecuador where my family attended a Lutheran church that holds services in English as well as Spanish, and which has been for many years, a very ecumenical place of worship both for long-time foreign residents and those just passing through--whatever their church background.

I find this sort of gathering, like the Thanksgiving one each fall, to be important as a reminder of how we are all children of God.

During my college years I gravitated towards Quakerism and tonight I am here as a representative of Old Chatham Quaker Meeting. We don't have pastors or priests, or rather, in our branch of Quakerism everyone is clergy and there is no laity. I'm just part of the congregation. Given the way we approach things you should know that this message tonight has been enriched by several Quakers at Old Chatham Meeting.

This is the fifth week of Lent and these interfaith worship services have been highlighting lines of the Lord's Prayer. Tonight's line is the familiar request to God:

"Give us this day our daily bread." Our daily bread.

We can see this line of the prayer as just asking God: "Please, let us have enough food today." Though few of us have probably ever experienced real hunger, we all understand this request. Nevertheless, I imagine when Jesus spoke the words he probably meant more than "please don't let us starve."

In asking God for bread on a daily basis, are we not asking God for sustenance? Is Jesus asking us to recognize that that which nourishes us, what feeds our bodies and also our souls, comes from God? Is he suggesting that we can expect this sustenance every day, and we don't

need to “save up” for tomorrow? That was certainly God’s command to the Israelites in the desert when he gave them manna, another form of bread: God commanded: “Take only what you can eat today!”

Do we, in our prayers, tell God: “I trust you, you will provide my sustenance today, you will provide it tomorrow!”? This sounds good, but...

I confess that I need to think about this; our money says “In God We Trust” but I know I easily find myself relying more on the money I’ve saved than on God. What is Jesus telling me here? Though we Quakers focus very little on Lent, I appreciate what these forty days represent: a time of looking at some of the hard questions. It is easy to say, I’ve sinned, forgive me. I find it much harder to look at how I’m pulled by some forces of culture and “prudence” in one direction, while God says there is another path.

Back to bread. It may offer a way to address the quandaries of living our faith. When I was a kid in Ecuador, most folks did not buy bread at a grocery store. Instead, every morning, someone would run to the corner store to buy the freshly baked, still warm bread rolls. Our daily bread meant leaving the house for fresh rolls, greeting neighbors who were getting their own morning breakfasts, hearing some news from the corner store clerk (who also sold the papers), feeling directly what the weather was like. It would be surprising to me if Jesus was not making a reference to much a much wider experience than just receiving bread. Having bread on the table meant interacting with the neighbors, having physical sensations of smell—and there is little more delicious than still-warm bread, and touch and being outside.

In Jesus time, I understand that bread was made from grain that was mostly planted and grown locally. It was harvested and threshed, and most everyone knew what the work of threshing was about. When the grain was separated from the chaff there was a communal sigh of relief: there would be food through the next harvest. But that is not all, someone in the community milled the grain into flour. Then often someone else would use the flour to make the dough and bake it. But perhaps the most special part of the process was the eating. It took community to make the bread, and then the experience culminated with

family and community eating together. I could see Jesus saying: “God, supply us with the family and community we need to thrive; give us what most nourishes us today, give us this day our daily bread.”

So, the next two lines of the Lord’s Prayer are:

*Forgive us our debts
As we also have forgiven our debtors*

We might look at these lines of the prayer as independent and disconnected but is it possible they are part of the flow of meaning and images within the prayer. Jesus is telling us we have work to do and we need sustenance to do it. Give us our daily bread. We need energy, the work is not easy. We ask God to forgive us—to follow **our** example since we have already forgiven others. Maybe the request for daily bread is a request for strength and courage to do the tough work of only asking God to do things we ourselves are willing to do. If bread is a metaphor for community as well as energy, it means we are not alone. I think we all have experienced how good friends can help us stand up and do the right thing: that is one of the glories of communities that support our souls’ work, the people who are part of the community help each other be better people!

I’d like to focus for a few moments on prayer itself. In the Gospel of Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer the disciples ask Jesus how to pray, how to talk with God. The disciples tell Jesus that John taught his disciples... so Jesus answers with an example of prayer, which we today call the Lord’s Prayer. In the Gospel of Matthew version, Jesus is talking about how some people pray ostentatiously, and he says: “Don’t try to impress people, instead talk to God secretly, behind closed doors, keep it simple, God already knows your heart, like this... and he speaks the prayer.” How do we communicate with God? Directly, with humility, letting God know what part we will do, acknowledging God’s holiness.

For us Quakers it could be said that prayer is the entirety of our worship services. We have found great nourishment by worshiping in community using an un-programmed format. Though Jesus teaches in the Lord’s Prayer how to talk to God, we Quakers tend to use the other side of the coin during our worship with a clear intention of listening for

what God has to say. We leave the space open. Some call it silence, the term Quakers often use is “expectant waiting.” Direct communication can go both ways as Jesus promised in John 14:26. *“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”*

As we worship, when anyone in the gathered community perceives the Spirit is sharing a message for the group, it is their responsibility to verbalize it. The community listens, and is asked to be open, to search for the truth in the message, knowing that Jesus’s example was one of integrity, peace, love for others, trust, and holding each other up. Our daily bread. Thanks for this chance to reflect on the importance of community in many of its forms, in my life.

Let’s finish with a little experiment: Dina Nowiky will lead us in an exercise in which we can choose to deepen our sense community. We are diverse, and that is a blessing because you can’t have harmony if everyone sings the same notes. We have the nourishment of each other and the earlier pot-luck, now it is all of our turn to act together!