

Draw Near To God

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Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15

Psalm 78:23-29

John 6:24-35

In our gospel last week, Jesus was forced to flee from the crowd and walk into the hills alone. Excited by his miracle of the loaves and fishes, they sought to make him king. Near-starving all the time, of course they wanted to stay near a ready source of miraculous bread! The next day, they track him down in Capernaum, offering their hunger for him to fill. But instead of bread and fish to fill their bellies once more, they receive a lesson on bread from heaven.

Jesus tells them to work for eternal food, not ordinary bread that becomes stale and moldy. "What must we do?" the people cry. "How do we get this bread from God?" Jesus says, "Only believe in the one sent from God." They clamor, "What sign are you going to give us so we will know you are the one?" As if feeding 5,000 people from one poor boy's lunch was not enough of a miracle!

They are a difficult audience! You can imagine them restless, demanding — looking for food and a show — "How do you expect us to believe it, unless we see it?" "Get on with it!" "What are you going to do for us?" But then someone remembers, "Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness — as it is written, "He gave them bread from heaven to eat." This is a quotation from Psalm 78 verse 24, which praises God for God's faithfulness despite the Israelite's rebellion and forgetfulness. And Jesus explains it: "Yes, your ancestors did get manna — but not from Moses. My Father/Mother gives you the true bread from heaven. This true bread is the bread of God which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Jesus is the bread of life. He is our manna from heaven, who came down to earth to live as an itinerant preacher who feeds a starving world, spiritually as well as physically.

Jesus gives life to the world in many different ways. The gospel of John teaches us that Jesus was with God at the time of the creation; the world was created through Jesus. Jesus redeemed us, giving his life to the world to draw it back to God. It is through Jesus that we have eternal life instead of death.

We can encounter our bread from heaven even this side of heaven! Through the Risen Christ in our midst, we experience new life in the community of the church. We encounter him in other people outside the church, particularly in those whom we serve. We can be blessed with his presence in private prayer. And during Holy Communion, we know Jesus as we eat the bread and drink the cup; and we are fed.

What a gift to receive our Lord and Savior! Yet we often turn away from the gift of Christ's presence at home, or work or church. I confess I often have difficulty keeping up a regular meditative prayer life. It's so hard to listen when my mind is churning! I know some of you've been there, too. Then we often do good works in the name of Christ, such as serving at Community Café, or working for religious institutions and nonprofits — but doing good can't bring us closer to God unless we also open our hearts and minds in prayer, and actively seek Christ's presence in the people that we serve.

Then there are those who skip out on Sunday worship! Some believe they worship best on the golf course, and perhaps they do, but I doubt it. Christ in nature, yes — but are we really dwelling with Christ or playing a competitive sport? And what about the prayer — there's probably just as much cursing as prayer on the golf course!

But I don't mean to single out golfers. A woman at my home church was formerly a regular attender but dropped out to meditate at home. I have no doubt it was a spiritual practice, and she may even have been enriching her personal relationship with Jesus. But the risen Christ we find in Christian community was surely missing.

Almost any activity can be a way to experience Jesus if your attitude and quality of presence are right; and if they're not, it's no better. If we are in church but not "present", it's just as bad as when we are away from church.

Personal prayer, Christian community and worship, service, and one more: we also experience the living God in Holy Communion. But we turn away from this, too! Some resist Communion because they don't feel worthy. In my tradition, German Evangelical and Reformed which became the United Church of Christ, there is a lot of "I'm not worthy" language in the older service. There even had to be special preparation services beforehand, to make sure you were ready. I understand this was similar in the Mennonite tradition, too — but now we know that there is no need for spiritual perfection — all who seek Jesus are welcome at the Lord's table.

An argument against frequent Communion that I hear all the time is that it won't be special if we have the Lord's Supper too often. Nothing could be farther from the truth! What if we said to our spouses and partners, "I'm sorry, dear, I've decided we must kiss only ten times a year — if we do it too often, it won't seem special!" Those would be some kisses, I guess!

Every day in the wilderness, the Israelites went out hungry, and returned with all they needed; bread from heaven to eat. The manna was new every day, and it had to be eaten every day or it would spoil. Those who tried to hoard the golden flakes discovered it full of worms and unfit to eat the next day. The Lord's presence is offered to us every day, too. God's gift of daily bread is designed to be shared as well, both physically and spiritually, as part of the rhythm of life God has granted us. We open ourselves to God's gifts, receive them, use them, and give them back to the hungry world. It is only through this rhythm of receiving, taking into ourselves,

and sharing, that we can be released from all the tiny, narrow self-absorbed ways that trap us, and hold us back from the embrace of the Risen Christ.

God invites us to receive the gift of fresh new life; God's very self; each and every day. It is a gift, offered freely and generously; we only need to accept it and pass it on. Jesus invites us to draw near, and to stay close. His daily bread is found in the gathered community, in service, in daily prayer, and in Holy Communion. How will you seek the risen Christ in the week to come?