***BREAKING BREAD***

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Texts: Acts 2:37-47 and Luke 15:1-2

When I sent out the order of worship for today which includes the Scripture readings, prayers, and hymns, I received this articulate, quizzical, pastoral response from my esteemed colleague: *Uhhhh....the first hymn encourages gathering?* Perhaps it does seem odd that we would open our worship by singing: *All who hunger, gather gladly*. After all, gathering is the last thing we are supposed to do in the midst of this pandemic, unless we are in a group of ten or less who are appropriately social distanced and wearing face coverings. When some form of social gathering is necessary, the gathering tends to be done more anxiously than gladly these days. It might be enough to lead Dr. Seuss to muse:

*I would not gather in a church.*

*I would not gather near a birch.*

*I would not gather in a crowd.*

*I would not gather with the proud.*

*I would not gather here or there.*

*I would not gather anywhere.*

*I do not like this virus, no!*

*I do not like it! Make it go!*

That seems to reflect the CDC recommendations as well as the sentiments of most of us face-covered, Facetiming, Facebook Live-tuned-in crowd. We want to be safe and to keep our neighbors and loved ones safe as well until this virus passes. How then might we *gather gladly* as we just sang?

The suggestion of the hymn is that we gather at the Lord’s Table, at that place where Christians have gathered for two millennia to break bread and share a cup in remembrance of the risen Christ. The Lord’s Table is not an ancient relic preserved across the centuries and located in a single place – at some Shrine of the Lord’s Table in Jerusalem to which all should make pilgrimage at some point in their lives. It is a table comprised of many tables at which Christian communities gather around the world and across the centuries to break bread together in the name of our risen Lord.

The Lord’s Table may be wood, stone, glass, or any other material. Unlike Noah’s ark there are no divine directions on how to build it – no specifications for how many cubits long it is to be or what kind of gopher wood is to be used. It may be located in a church or a home or a catacomb. What makes a table the Lord’s Table has nothing to do with the table itself and everything to do with the community who gathers there and the purpose for which they gather. In our Reformed Tradition we have no altar. The altar was the place where sacrifices were made. The altar has been replaced by a table around which we gather to share a meal that recalls Jesus’ great sacrifice for all of us; no other sacrifices are necessary! Such tables are found wherever the community gathers to break bread and share a cup in remembrance of Jesus as he directed us to do. That is what Christians have been doing since the very beginning of the church.

In the passage we read from Acts this morning we hear Jews in Jerusalem responding to the Good News proclaimed by Peter on that first Pentecost. The wind and flame of the Spirit had blown the disciples out from behind closed doors into the streets to share the Good News of the risen Christ. Jews from all over the world had gathered for the Passover and hearing of Jesus’ great sacrifice of love in his crucifixion and resurrection, they were, according to Luke, “cut to the heart” and anxious to respond. But they had no idea what such a response would look like. What were they to do to show that Peter’s message had touched them deeply and changed their hearts? Peter’s answer was fairly simple: repent, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, and receive the gift of the Spirit.

For two thousand years that is how we have welcomed brothers and sisters in Christ into the family of faith – by baptism that not only marks the forgiveness of sins but also includes an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to enable us to do what we cannot do alone. Over three thousand persons were baptized that day in Jerusalem; millions more have joined them across the years, including most of us. But what then? After the waters of baptism have dried, how do Christians live into that baptism?

Luke says “*they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers*.” These new disciples shared their new lives in Christ in community with one another. They didn’t go their separate ways to be solitary Christians with a personal relationship with a personal savior; they embraced a way of life that was shared with brothers and sisters in Christ. Central to that life was continuing to grow in faith by learning from the disciples. Central to that life was prayer for and with one another. Central to that life was sharing their possessions so that all had their needs met. But central too was fellowship, literally *koinonia*, in *the breaking of bread* which included not only potluck dinners with goat chili and Fig Newtons, but also breaking bread and sharing a cup at table together in remembrance of their risen Lord. In so doing, their tables became the Lord’s Table.

In Hungary there is a table made out of a huge hunk of granite that sits deep in the catacombs under a Catholic church. For over 1500 years the Lord’s Supper has been celebrated at that table every day. In times of peace and times of war, amid raging pandemics and raging blizzards, in times of great spiritual awakening and great religious despair, across the divides of the Great Schism and the Reformation, bread has been broken and a cup shared at that table in the name of the risen Lord every single day! The granite table has stood the test of time, but it is the community that has faithfully gathered there across the centuries that has made that slab of rock the Lord’s Table. A woman who visited that church writes:

*I just had to touch that table. It should have been rough and cold, but instead, it was warm and polished by all the countless hands that had lifted bread from it and poured wine over it. Every day. For 1500 years![[1]](#endnote-1)*

At this table Covenant Christians have celebrated the Lord’s Supper for almost sixty years – sometimes quarterly, sometimes monthly, and more recently weekly. Generation after generation has come to this table for the same purpose – to break bread and share a cup as brothers and sisters in Christ in the name of the risen Lord. Here the same words are repeated that were spoken by Jesus and by priests at that granite table in Hungary for these past 1500 years: “*Take, eat. This is my body. Do this in remembrance of me.*” Here the invitation is extended, not by us, but by Christ, to receive the gifts of God for the people of God. You may recall from the responses of some of our children to Sarah last week that sharing this holy meal together at this table is one of the things the kids miss most about being the church in the midst of this pandemic – and perhaps that is true for some of you too! We miss being the people of God in this way in this place at this Lord’s Table.

Today as we join in virtual worship through the miracle of modern technology – which sometimes more closely resembles “the total depravity of inanimate objects” – we recognize that our coming together is less a physical gathering than a spiritual one. We don’t share the same space within these walls, and for the sake of our health in the midst of this pandemic that is a good thing. But that does not mean that we do not gather gladly. Instead

* we gather in a spirit of ***gratitude*** for the God who has called us children and disciples, a God who has blessed us across the years and across the weeks of these viral times.
* We gather in a spirit of ***praise*** for the God from whom all our blessings flow – including this bread and table at which we gather.
* We gather in a spirit of ***faith*** in Jesus Christ who is both Lord and messiah (to quote Peter) and is OUR Lord and messiah.
* We gather in a spirit of ***koinonia***, acknowledging that God’s Spirit binds us together with one another across space and time, making us one people with one another.
* We gather in a spirit of ***hope*** in the God who has promised to be with us here and now to help us through these viral times, to offer the promise of brighter days ahead, and to assure us of a heavenly home in which there is a place for us.
* We gather in a spirit of ***joy*** in the promises of God for us and for the world, promises that we celebrate at this table today!

We do not gather side by side this day, but we do gather gladly, gathering at tables scattered far and wide across this city, county, state, nation, and perhaps beyond to break bread together in remembrance of the risen Christ. In so doing our tables become one table, the Lord’s Table; our families become one family – brothers and sisters in Christ who break this bread in remembrance of him; our gatherings become one gathering – the gathering of God’s grateful, joyful, hopeful people! Welcome my brothers and sisters, welcome to the great table of the Lord, a table at which we all gladly gather virtually, spiritually, joyfully! Welcome! Amen

1. Sue Boardman, “Come to the Table”, *Monday Morning*, March 8, 1999, p.4 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)