Thanksgiving Sermon: Communion as Abundant Feast

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Scripture: John 6:1-15, Proverbs 9:1-6, Psalm 100

Susanne: Story about talking with United Church people at my college in Toronto about Communion – they were horrified by the notion of closed communion or of children not participating. For them, it’s the Eucharist, which comes from the Greek word for “thanksgiving” or “gratitude” – it’s a celebratory feast – why would you not include the children?! In their view, it’s comparable to excluding the children in our families from our Thanksgiving turkey dinners!

* So what are the implications of viewing Communion as a thanksgiving feast? How does that change the way we experience and understand it? It seems to change the tone of it, from a solemn ritual of remembrance of the night Jesus was betrayed – the night before he was killed – to a celebration, a joyful gathering around an abundant table, a party! It reminds us to be thankful for God’s nourishing love, which overflows our expectations and provides more than enough for all. This table is heavy, sagging with the abundance of food as God’s generous gift to us, which we remember with particular clarity at this harvest time of year.

Patrick: As we were preparing for this Sunday, we thought of all kinds of biblical examples in which God hosts miraculous meals. A few of them include

* + Manna & Quail (Numbers 11)
	+ Wisdom hosts a banquet (Proverbs 9:1-6)
	+ Ravens bring Elijah bread and meat each morning and evening (1st Kngs 17.6)
	+ Elisha multiplies 20 barley loaves to serve 100 people (2nd Kngs 4:42-44)
	+ Jesus feeds groups of both 4,000 and 5,000
	+ Jesus multiplies a catch of fish (Luke 5.1-11, John 21.1-14)
* We don’t often think about these in relation to communion, but such events are a “sign” (John 6.2,14)—sacramental—in that they point us to God’s goodness and care.

Susanne: Well, let’s flesh out some of these stories further. Tell me more about Jesus’ miracle in John 6. It contains “echoes” of some of these earlier stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, right?

Patrick: **John 6:1-15** is a beautiful story in which Jesus builds upon earlier accounts of God’s miraculous provision out of his bible—the Hebrew Scriptures.[[1]](#footnote-1) Consider, for example, the textual links with the Manna and Quail incident as recorded in Numbers 11.

* In John 6.5 Jesus asks, “where shall we ever buy bread for these people to eat?” In Num 11.13 Moses asks, “Where am I to get meat to give to all this people?”
* In John 6.41,43 people are found to be grumbling, just like the people in Numbers 11.1
* In Numbers 11-7-9 the manna is described. A bit later in John 6 Jesus references the manna of the wilderness in relation to the miraculous feeding.
* In Numbers 11.13 the people want to eat flesh / meat. In John 6.51 Jesus equates himself both with the bread of life and flesh.

The similarities between Numbers 11 and John 6 are amazing. John’s miracle feeding intensifies when we also layer on the similarities it has with the Elisha story of 2nd Kngs 4.

* Both stories involve a lad who brings bread to a holy man of God.
* Both stories involve a question from the underlings surrounding the holy men of God: “What are they [these loaves and fishes] among so many people?”, a disciple asks. “How can I set this before a hundred people?” the barely bearing servant of Elijah asks.
* Both stories involve barley. And here John’s abundance feeding differs from the other gospels. He denotes the loaves as barley. Barley is only used four times as an adjective in the Hebrew Scriptures. If one were to push the barley connection we would remember that Ruth harvested barely from the field of Boaz. Ruth and Boaz: the parents of Obed, the great grand-parents of King David, the great / great / great /great grand-parents of Jesus. This family knows barley.
* And both stories involve leftovers. I love leftovers. There truly is something about Thanksgiving leftovers where the gravy has congealed turkey pieces with mashed potatoes with green beans. The trio have been marinating through the night and the flavours are almost better than the day before. Both Elisha and Jesus have leftovers.

How does this all relate to communion? At various times over the last years you have heard me natter on the specific language used in the accounts of the Lord’s Supper: Jesus takes bread, blesses / give thanks (eucharist in Greek), and distributes. This is John’s “Lord’s Supper” scene and he blatantly links it to the manna and quail. This is John’s “Lord’s Supper” scene and he blatantly links it to Elisha. In other words John’s Gospel is suggesting that abundant feasts happen, and that the grace of God is made known in them. Thanksgiving meals, meals of abundance, are sacramental for those with eyes to see. In John’s account the crowds experience the grace of an abundant feast of fish and loaves, and those closest to Jesus (the disciples) come to an understanding that the meal was more than a meal. It was a sign pointing to the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

Susanne: Those are powerful stories! I find myself drawn to two somewhat more obscure stories about feasting in the Bible. In Women’s Bible Study, we’ve been looking at the figure of Woman Wisdom, or the personified wisdom of God who is depicted as a woman (a close parallel to the New Testament’s Word of God). Among the many roles Wisdom takes on in Proverbs, one of them is as a generous host. So we read in **Proverbs 9:1-6**:

“Wisdom has built her house,
    she has hewn her seven pillars.
2She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine,
    she has also set her table.
3She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls
    from the highest places in the town,
4“You that are simple, turn in here!”
    To those without sense she says,
5“Come, eat of my bread
    and drink of the wine I have mixed.
6Lay aside immaturity, and live,
    and walk in the way of insight.”

This is not any old meal, but a banquet of bread, wine, and meat (a surprisingly Communion-like meal in the middle of the Old Testament!) which has been carefully prepared from scratch – even the house is newly-built by Wisdom herself. One commentary I read pointed out that a house with pillars isn’t really a house – it’s a lavish “palace, a luxurious dwelling, a temple”![[2]](#footnote-2) And interestingly, Wisdom’s palatial house has seven pillars, which are a reference to the seven pillars which made up the foundation of the earth – so it’s a reference to creation. Indeed, in the previous chapter in Proverbs, we’re told that God made the earth through God’s Wisdom, that she was with God in the beginning:

“when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
30    then I was beside him, like a master worker;[or “little child”]
and I was daily his delight,
    rejoicing before him always,
31rejoicing in his inhabited world
    and delighting in the human race.” [Prov. 8:29b-30]

Feasting is, of course, closely tied with creation – with planting and farming and gardening and harvest. So here we have a beautiful depiction of the Wisdom of God as the ultimate host, with all creation as an abundant banquet she has prepared – a banquet which nourishes us physically and spiritually, through which we can learn God’s Wisdom and ways, and in which we’re invited to delight and rejoice and celebrate.

Patrick: In the first creation story **every** green plant and **every** tree with seed in its fruit is good for food. That is abundance!

Susanne: Exactly. And the other story I appreciate is similarly about God’s abundance through creation. It’s about the prophet Elijah in 1 Kings 17. Elijah has been working hard trying to hold King Ahab accountable, and has managed to make himself pretty unpopular, as you can imagine. Ahab is described as the worst and most sinful of all the kings of Israel, so this was no easy job. So God gives Elijah a bit of a sabbatical – a stress-leave, if you will – and sends him to stay in the wilderness for a little while, till things blow over a bit. God says, “Go from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 4You shall drink from the wadi, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.” 5So he went and did according to the word of the Lord; he went and lived by the Wadi Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. 6The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the wadi.” It’s a wonderful scene, isn’t it? Here God is a tender provider, making sure Elijah is fed out in the wilderness by sending the very ravens with morning and evening meals for him. And these are no meager rations – they’re generous portions of meat and bread twice a day, and clean water to drink. Here God provides once again through God’s very creation, which is full of signs of God’s generosity and loving provision of abundant food.

* Of course, this story is also a clear echo of the story of manna and quails provided to the Israelites as they wandered in the desert; here Elijah is given even more abundant food than they were as he rests away from the controversy he’s created. Even in the midst of this frightening and uncertain time, Elijah can rely on God to take care of him and nurture him through the natural world. This God knows about hospitality, which was – and is – so important in Middle Eastern cultures.

Patrick: Feasts happen. Abundance happens. Nourishment happens. What keeps us from entering into abundance God offers us here, with our families, in the community? In considering this situation I have come up with three different reasons we find it difficult to join in abundant feasts where the Jesus Christ is made known.

* It is humbling to receive. Most of us, typically, do not like being dependent on others. We may dress it up saying we do not want to “inconvenience” another. In the end, though, our discomfort has more do with us than with the offer. So we don’t accept an invitation over. Or we choose not to attend a potluck in which we have brought nothing. Sometimes pride keeps us from meeting the living God at the table.
* There are still other factors which have the potential to keep us from sacramental banquets. In Luke 14 (vv. 15-24) Jesus tells a parable about a great dinner in which the invited guests refuse to attend on account of their ties to property and family (see Robert Tannehill’s, *Luke* (Abingdon new Testament Commentaries), p. 233). In the parable of Luke 15 (vv. 11-32) the older brother is unwilling to join the merry making (εὐφραίνω) when the younger brother returns home; we might say he has a grudge against his brother and also father. The Rich man of Luke 16 (vv. 19-31) misses an opportunity for communion with Lazarus because his feasting (εὐφραίνω) has limited his vision. Each of these stories references food scenes in which some have missed a banquet with sacramental overtones. Jesus is aware we are subject to emotions which might keep us from the feast, and he tells these stories to help us reflect.
* Finally, sacramental meals sometimes fail to happen because of our shame, fear of failure or low expectations. The loaves in John 6 are barley, not wheat. Barley was cheap food (Brown, p. 233), food of the lower caste, probably causing a certain amount of shame as he offers them up rather than wheat bread. And as the disciple noted, not nearly enough to feed those around us. The boy is not deterred. He offers what he has. Something miraculous happens when we overcome feeling inadequate about our offering. Jesus himself, the text says, takes what we offer, multiplies it, and personally feeds others. Jesus does this when we offer him what we have. Miracles happen. Some people’s expectations are so low, their shame so high, their fear so great the offering don’t get made. In this story Jesus invites us all to offer what we have and enjoy the abundance.

Susanne: That’s interesting to reflect on in light of Wisdom’s feast, because there she calls people in off the street – parallel to Jesus’ parable about inviting people from the highways and byways to the wedding feast (Luke 14). This is truly an open invitation, a wide hospitality! God’s hospitality encompasses all creation. There’s something about the experience of God’s profound generosity, God’s tender provision and nourishment, that makes possible our generosity, that grants us the wisdom to be good *guests and hosts*. Because of divine abundance, we know there is enough for all, enough to share. And yet we hold back – we want everything to be perfect when we host, and because it never is, we miss out on these “sacramental feasts.”

* I’ve been reading lately about “scruffy hospitality” – people are trying to put the emphasis back on eating together and the sacredness of sharing a feast rather than the perfection of complicated gourmet recipes, designer dishes and centrepieces, and a spotlessly clean home. In this style of feasting, guests are supposed to “come as you are” and hosts are to “host as you are.” It’s a really refreshing change! And imagine if we applied that kind of feeling to Communion.
* I’m also reminded of the contemporary story of **Sara Miles**, a formerly atheist writer in San Francisco who is transformed by the practice of taking communion spontaneously. In her memoir, *Eat This Bread* (pp.57-60), she talks about simply walking into a local church and finding herself participating in Communion. This experience – her gratitude for it – leads to her starting a food pantry for the hungry in her community, and for her, these two ways of sharing food are very much the same: God is present in both, wherever God’s abundance is shared:

“Eating Jesus cracked my world open and made me hunger to keep sharing food with other people. That desire took me to an altar, at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco, where I helped break the bread for Holy Communion, then to a food pantry that I set up around the same altar, where we gave away free groceries to anyone who showed up. . . . Soon they began to feed and take care of each other, then run things, then start other pantries. It was my first experience in discovering that regular people could do Jesus’ work.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

But imagine if she had been turned away from Communion that day instead of experiencing welcome? If that church had not had a practice of open Communion – of Communion as thanksgiving feast – she would have been denied that transformative experience.

Patrick: So there’s that vulnerability of receiving again. Because she first received Communion, she was able to share out of that sense of having been served, of being open to receiving, out of that gratitude for God’s abundant feast.

Susanne: This comes to life for me in an old Jewish proverb about what heaven and hell are like: “Rabbi Mendel wanted to know what heaven and hell looked like, so Elijah took him to show him. Elijah led him to a large room where a big fire was burning and where there was a large table with a huge pot of steaming soup on it. Around the table sat people with long spoons that were longer than their arms, and because the people could not eat with these spoons, they sat around the table and starved. Rabbi Mendel found this room and what he saw there so terrible that he quickly ran outside.” . . . “Then Elijah took Rabbi Mendel to heaven and into another room where a big fire was burning and where there was a l;arge table with a big pot of steaming soup on it. And around this table sat people with the same [long] spoons, but they did not have to starve because they were feeding each other.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. Based upon Raymond Brown’s, *The Gospel According to John* (Anchor Bible Series), vl 1, p. 233-246. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sylvia Schroer, *Wisdom Has Built Her House,* 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sara Miles, *Jesus Freak*, xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Retold in: Soelle, *Strength of Weak*, 159-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)