

2 August 2015 (10th Sunday After Pentecost/18th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church
“Our Common Language”
John 6:24-35

What is the common language of community? When people live together, how are they able to relate to each other in harmony? A common language isn't always a matter of words. Food, for example, is one type of common language. Music is another. So are sports, like tennis and golf, or recreational activities, like fishing. The common love of a shared interest can draw people together in more profound ways than a conversation in which both speak the same tongue. But even people who enjoy the communion of a shared interest don't necessarily enjoy harmony with one another. There is that little matter called ego, the root of all competition: if I don't like the way you play golf, or if you don't think that I can sing my way out of a paper bag, it doesn't matter how much we like golf or singing. Our common language may actually alienate us from each other. We need only observe the number of people in the world who do share a common language through speech, food, sports, or music, to conclude that commonality alone does not create community. Sadly, even a common religion is no guarantee of community. True community as communion, as a matter of the heart, is rare. It is what Jesus came to give the world. What, then, is the common language by which we enjoy that true communion?

It is said that the reason why the Israelites wandered such a circuitous route through the wilderness is that it took that long for God to fashion them into a community. Along the way, as we see in today's reading from Exodus 16, this fledgling “people of God” was contentious with each other, with Moses, and with God. In fact, the Exodus passage reveals the one bewildering sentiment they seemed to share, that they would have been better off in Egypt, for at least there they could have died from something other than starvation. No wonder one of the most popular sayings of Alcoholics Anonymous is, “So, you want to go back to Egypt,” to point out the irrational absurdity of yearning for the old life, the slavery of alcohol. Here in Exodus, the Israelites appear to have bought the conspiracy theory that Moses was plotting to kill them all along, hence their current unfortunate situation.

How will Moses respond to such groundless accusations? How will God respond? The manna that rained down from heaven, literally the “what is it?” (as the Hebrew *manna* translates) from heaven, sustained the Israelites with food for the body and mercy for the soul. And by the time Jesus appeared on the scene and began his ministry, “bread from heaven” was code for God's decisive deliverance of his people from all oppression. This is what Jesus understood as he encountered the masses in Capernaum after crossing the Sea of Galilee. He had become much sought after as he gained a reputation for healing people in body and in soul. His fame spread further after he fed a crowd of five thousand who had followed him to a deserted place, perhaps a wilderness not unlike the setting of the Israelites' distress. Many in the current crowd who met him in Capernaum were likely part of that number who witnessed such a remarkable demonstration of true community—communion and deliverance shared in the

midst of desperate circumstances. But as Jesus would have them understand, community's common language is about more than food, as important as that is for sustaining human life, just as "bread from heaven" is about more than bread. 'The common language of community begins and ends with me,' Jesus said, 'because that is why I have come into the world, to give you the true bread from heaven.'

Now, when Jesus said, "I am the bread of life," he was telling the people that he was their common language, that what they shared out there in the wilderness was more than bread, it was true communion, community without boundaries, without strife, without misunderstanding, without resentment. That kind of pure, true communion could only have one source. Like manna, that kind of life's bread can only come from above, from God's hand. Like manna, Jesus came into the world from God's hand.

About ten years ago, I had the privilege of visiting South Africa as part of our Presbytery's delegation to Cape Town. At that point, South Africa was only ten years removed from the end of apartheid, and like every other institution in society, the church was struggling to reconcile the people of God across social, political, and racial lines. One day our delegation listened to a very tense exchange between white ministers and their black counterparts from the poor townships, in which each accused the other of failing to reach out and communicate from their respective worlds. They were trying hard, and they all expressed a common commitment to the unity of the church, but it was clear that talk alone was not going to do the job. A couple of days later, many of us attended a white church in Cape Town on a Sunday when a congregation from one of the poor townships joined them in worship. Efforts were made throughout the service to sing songs from both traditions, and to incorporate both English and Xhosa, the language of the township. But it was not until communion that we all experienced the joy of our common language. Blacks and whites, Afrikaaners and English, native Africans and Americans, walked together, the young helping the old, the strong helping the weak, across racial and national lines, and shared the body and blood of Christ. We came from very different places and backgrounds, but Jesus had given us a common language--himself. In those moments of sharing the sacrament, all divisions dissolved and we were one in the Spirit. I shall never forget that.

We need only watch the world and observe the intense hostility and animosity that divide people, to realize that these sad realities reflect a failure of community. The world is filled with noble intentions and grand efforts, important negotiations that successfully bring people and nations together, humanitarian programs that successfully address social problems, but these cooperative projects do not produce community. As long as there is human trickery, deceit, and scheming—as the Apostle Paul put it so well in Ephesians—there will be not only a need for human community, but also a need for a divine source. The mark of a church that looks like Jesus is one in which God has drawn the members together in one body, and has given them the power to grow up to spiritual maturity. That growing up makes forward progress every time we gather to share these elements, Christ's body and blood, our common language, bread from heaven that gives us true community and communion. As a community, when we are transformed to look like Jesus, the world looks at us with eyes that yearn for deliverance from oppression, and

sees in us a people who know the meaning of God “with us and for us.” And it is through these elements that we learn the common language of true communion with Christ, and with each other



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