TABLE PEOPLE

Acts 2:42
(They gave constant attention…to the breaking of bread)

Christ the King Sunday, 2005

When I started my divinity degree at Candler School of Theology I was 22 years old. While I had grown up in the church and spent my teenage years in a Methodist parsonage, I remember an evening a few weeks before high school graduation as a time of consciously professing faith in Jesus Christ. It was also a moment when I heard what I knew to be my call to preach. So, four years after really beginning my Christian life as an adult, I found myself sitting down at a desk in a seminary classroom. Like anyone who looks back, I know there were some things I should have done better. I was an average student who could have been and should have been a better student.

But, my biggest regret about my Candler experience centers not around the classroom, but the Chapel. Each week there was in the Chapel a service of worship which offered the Lord's Supper to the student community. I was a young Christian of 4 years and a 22 year old man who suffered from the illusion of knowing more than he really did. I decided that receiving Communion once a week was too often. "Frequency would take away its meaning," I told myself. Perhaps, it was my age, or the fact that I grew up in religious community that offered the Sacrament once a quarter. What is certain is that I have often regretted being so careless about an important spiritual opportunity. Now, some 30+ years later, I would not make such a mistake. What I have learned out of seminary is that each moment around the Table of the Lord is a precious moment of divine grace. I know now I could never experience such moments too often.

These believers in the Church in Jerusalem after Pentecost would surely agree. As we turn back to Acts 2:42 once again we hear the Word saying to us,

> They devoted themselves to the apostles'
> teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of
> bread and the prayers.

We have, of course, been with this text for awhile now. We remember that the word "devoted" comes from a Greek word which literally means, "single minded" or "one who gives constant devotion to a thing." Thus, we have affirmed the early church as a church which gave constant attention to spiritual things. One of those things was the apostles' teaching, or the Word of God. Another one of those things was fellowship, or caring for the people of God with the same care and love expressed in the heart of Jesus. And this morning, we turn to the third thing to which they gave constant attention: the breaking of bread.

The language of the verse tells us they were not casual about their observance of the Lord's Supper. In the beginning the Lord's Supper was a part of a larger meal. It was held in a home since there were no places like church buildings set apart for Christians to gather. In the beginning it all took place in homes. While it is likely that the gathering would take place in a home of one of the more affluent, each member of the house church which met in that place was welcome. Faith in Christ and baptism into the faith took precedence over income level and social class. Members of the church would gather in a home, each bringing some food to share with others, and after the meal for physical sustenance, the gathered community of believers would share in the meal for spiritual sustenance. When the larger meal was finished, the wine would be poured and the bread broken in such a way as to bring to mind the holy sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world.

As time went along, the early church did in places get careless about the holy meal, but it took some time for the practice to be so abused that the Apostle Paul would take the church to task about it. By the time the Apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthian Church some 20 years later, things had gone awry. As we read the 11t chapter of the first letter to Corinth, we see a picture of abuse at the Lord's Supper. At verse 20 of that 11th chapter we begin to read,

> When you come together, it is not really to eat
> the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to
> eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper,
> And one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.
> What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in?
> Or do you show contempt for God the church of
> God and humiliate those who have nothing?(20-22)

The language seems to suggest that the early arrivals "pigged out" leaving little for poorer folks who might arrive later with very little to bring to the common table. Instead of a community meal for the church, the gatherings were occasions for gluttony and drunkenness. Sharing the Lord's Supper in the aftermath of such disregard for one another made it difficult for people to eat the bread of the Sacrament in the right spirit.

It is amazing how the passing of time can cause those who profess faith in Christ to be casual about one of the most sacred moments in the life of the church. As we read this lesson for the day from Acts 2:42 we are reminded again of its value for the church. Giving constant attention to the breaking of the bread was one of the four distinguishing marks of the early church as its life was shaped and directed by the Holy Spirit in those post-Pentecost days. Does this mean they shared in the Sacramental meal each time they gathered? Most likely, such was indeed the custom. They would have surely thought our custom of monthly Communion to be an abomination!

What their practice declared is far more important than the number of times they shared the Sacrament each month. What their practice declared was their conviction that the church was Jesus centered. As they gave constant attention to the breaking of bread, they

were reminded that Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross was the center of their life together. But, it was not just a reminder to those in the church, but also a part of the church's witness to the world around it about the importance of the Christ who died on the cross as the Savior of all people.

No matter how many times we receive the Sacrament within the church, we declare it valueless if we do it lightly without regard for the crucified Christ we remember around the Table. We hardly give the breaking of bread the kind of attention it needs if we fail to take seriously the invitation to the Table. Sometimes as it is read, I fear none of us are really listening, but have instead raced on to some other point in the ritual. That invitation begins with the words, "Christ our Lord invites to his table…" Regardless of who we see administering the Sacrament, we must never forget that our Lord is really the host who invites us all to come. Those of us who serve only do so in His behalf. And then, as we listen again we hear who is invited. "…all who love Him, who earnestly repent of their sins, and seek to live in peace with one another." There are surely times when we receive the Sacrament in an unworthy manner. If we do not come out of love for Christ, we ought stay in our seats. If we are living in some known sin and refuse to turn away from it, we ought stay in our seats. If we are not at peace with someone, if there is something between us and another, we ought go to that person seeking forgiveness and reconciliation on our way to the Table.

To share in the breaking of bread is to declare the Jesus is at the center of our lives. It is to declare that creedal word which says, "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." To give constant attention to the breaking of bread surely means living a life that not only professes such a truth around the Table, but also proclaims it through spoken word and lived-out-lifestyle in the world. To take the moment of Table gathering seriously is to know in our heart as we come that we truly do desire to be made one with Christ, and one with each other, and one in ministry to the all the world. Each time the bread is broken we declare our love and care to each other and, each time, we proclaim the crucified Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on November 20, 2005.