

Sunday, August 11, 2024
The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Dr. Luigi Gioia, *Theologian in Residence*
on

1 Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

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Keep the Feast

“In war and in peace, in chaos and in calm, St. Thomas Church has borne witness to the centrality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with its demanding, thrilling, puzzling, powerful, frustrating, elevating message that in this world of tribulation, we should be of good cheer, for Our Lord has overcome the world. And this parish has done so by being steady amid swirl, sturdy amid storm. It has kept the feast, and thus it has kept the faith”.

Some of you might have recognized this sentence. It is an extract from the dazzling and highly entertaining talk that Jon Meacham, the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and speech writer for President Joe Biden, gave here at Saint Thomas last February.

What intrigued me most about his talk was the title: “To Keep the Feast: St. Thomas Church in War and Peace”. It is borrowed from the sentence we proclaim together each Sunday during mass just before receiving communion. The priest says “Alleluia Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us” and the whole assembly replies “Therefore let us keep the feast alleluia”.

A feast is a meal. A solemn, ritualized, choreographed meal – but a meal nonetheless. This building looks more like a temple than a dining room, the table has become an altar, at communion we only eat a tiny piece of bread and only drink a sip of wine – and yet whenever we gather here on Sundays what we are keeping is a feast, the reason why we gather here on Sunday is to share a meal.

Indeed, there are various layers of meanings to this meal. This place does not look at all like the dining room where Jesus and his disciple celebrated the last supper because in the course of history the focus of Christian devotion has become Jesus’ declaration that the bread is his body and the wine his blood offered as a sacrifice for us. Over the centuries, something so sacred elicited ever-growing reverence and generated the music, architecture, and liturgies we are now familiar with.

What has never changed however is that we gather to eat bread and drink wine, that this remains an invitation to sit at the same table with God, that this is a meal.

Even outside churches and in the lives of people who are not religious, meals functions like rituals: we follow traditions on how and what we eat, there are precise times, we establish ways of setting the table, sit, serve food, talk. Meals uniquely create, sustain and affirm bonds within families, with friends, colleagues, partners. It might happen that we have to share a meal with complete strangers or

people with whom we do not want to have anything to do – but this is the exception, something we normally avoid.

The meal we share here in church in the memory of Jesus is also meant to create, strengthen and affirm bonds between those who take part in it. This is the whole point of it. Ancient Christian authors say that we all eat one bread so that we can become one body, one family, one community. Unlike our ordinary meals however here in church everyone is invited to the table, routinely there are people who are new, strangers and maybe even people we would not befriend in other circumstances. Granted, our participation to the eucharist often does not require us to have a conversation with the other people who take part in it, unless we stay on after the end for coffee hour and make a point to reach out not only to the people we know already but also to the newcomers.

But whether we end up talking with the people who come to mass with us or not, we should not underestimate the power of gathering, singing, listening, praying and eating together to give birth to a different, unheard-of kind of community. **It is the unique character of the food we eat at this meal that makes the whole difference.** It is the “bread of life” (John 6.35) or, we could also say, “the bread of love”. The bread is Jesus himself who gives his life out of love for us and wants that us too should “walk in love, as he himself loved us, and gave himself to us, an offering and a sacrifice to God” (Eph 5.2)

Walk in love.

We do not receive the bread of life, the bread of love, individually but together, as a community. Just as the angel with Elijah, we too are told: “get up and eat”, so that we can carry on our journey “in the strength of this food” (1 Kings 19.5,8), so that we can “walk in love”. What a wonderful expression, “walk in love”. Loving sets us in motion, urges us to go out, to reach out. The bread of love makes us people who are moved to start caring not just for family, friends, and the people we know, but for every other human being.

Just think for one moment to all the communities you are part of: our family, our circles of friends, our work environment, the cultural or sport associations or and the like. They require us to care for persons who care for us in return, with whom we have interests in common. It is natural and good – and yet Jesus tells us:

If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? (Mt 5.46f)

Instead, sharing in the bread of love here in church creates a community open to every human being, makes us accountable to every person, especially those in need.

Jon Meacham’s talk in February reminded us of how Saint Thomas has kept the feast over the past two hundred years. It is our turn now to discern how to continue to keep the feast, keep sharing the bread of life, keep walking in love.

As you know, over the past year a group of some 50 members of Saint Thomas has volunteered to explore new ways of reaching out to the people in need especially in our neighbourhood here in Mid-Town Manhattan.

We have realized that it is important to move beyond mere *service provision models* of community outreach where we determine what people need before listening to them so that those being served have limited or no agency at all. There are ways of helping others that give them relief on the moment but also leave them exactly where they are.

We have realized that it is crucial to join forces with other communities of faith around us and contribute to the work of the existing *Ecumenical Outreach Partnership* (EOP) – of which Saint Thomas has been part since 2017 with the neighbouring Fifth Avenue Presbyterian and St Patrick Cathedral.

The EOP employs several social workers (partially financed by Saint Thomas) and addresses the needs of vulnerable New Yorkers not only to face challenges related to hunger but also to lack of housing, insecure shelter, poverty, physical and mental health, safety, isolation and struggle to meet basic needs.

The model is very effective: there is a core of competent and dedicated social workers who make sure that community outreach is done professionally, in compliance with regulations and safeguarding, and in such a way that people are helped to improve their life situations. There is food distribution twice a week where the social workers find out about the guests' other needs and set appointments to give assistance on a case-by-case basis. I was told the other day that they manage over 8000 individual cases every year! The guests have access to a medical van several times every month where they get free health care.

Everyone can volunteer to the EOP but we have opted for a deeper commitment to this incredible work *as a community* first by joining some of the EOP activities at Fifth Presbyterian to get acquainted with the organization and its work. Then we have started to reflect on the community outreach activities that can be run here at Saint Thomas under the umbrella of the EOP.

I have been struck by the generosity and enthusiasm of the people who have volunteered over the past few months and we can rely on the example set by some of our parishioners who steadfastly run a soup kitchen that provided meals for over 300 people every Saturday for decades! They literally **kept the feast** and shared the bread of love. They teach us that the commitment needed cannot be occasional, perfunctory, amateurish. That the motivation cannot be a vague desire to help people in need, or guilt about social inequality. Like Elijah we can walk in love only “in the strength of the food” that Christ gives us, in the strength of the bread of life. For this, Sunday after Sunday we have to “get up and eat” – otherwise, as the angel tells Elijah, “the journey will be too much for you” (1 Kings 19.7).

We can only give what we receive – and if what we want to give is not just bland and occasional help to feel good about ourselves but Christ's own love and care, then we have to make sure we keep sustaining ourselves at the Lord's table, we keep eating the bread of life and love – in a word, we have to make sure that we too “keep the feast”.
