

Communion Meditation for August 13

John 6: 41-51

Home Moravian Church, August 11, 2024

One of the worst things a public figure can do is get above his raisings. You know this. You know how, even while the hometown celebrates their star's moment in the national spotlight, some locals will always be shaking their heads and muttering, "I knew you when you wasn't so big."

That's how I imagine the voices in today's gospel story. When hometown boy Jesus says that he's come down from heaven, his critics cry foul. "Isn't this Jesus?" they say. "Jesus, the son of Joseph? Come down from heaven? Hogwash! We know where he came from; we can point out the house." And then the clincher: *We know his daddy and his mamma*. Human beings do not "come down from heaven." They are born down the street, to people we know.

Once you get past a certain age, there is not much mystery in the origins of humans—or maybe anything else. Oh, you might learn something new from time to time. A friend told me her niece was extremely upset the first time she saw a live chicken and learned that *that* was where Chik-fil-a comes from. I advised my friend not to tell her niece about eggs. But in general, though perhaps unclear on the details, the worldly child knows that babies come from mommies and daddies; eggs come from chickens; and bread comes from the grocery store.

When I was a child, my experience of bread was attached to a billboard that some of you may remember, featuring a cartoon rabbit, with one ear stuck out over the top of the billboard, and a mechanism moving that ear up and down. Remember? Sing it with me: "That's what I

said: Bunny Bread!” What I knew about bread was Bunny Bread: white and soft, it could be squished into little balls or stuck to the roof of my mouth.

But do you remember when grocery stores started offering whole wheat bread? I think that happened in the 1970s, when the notion arose that America’s heavily processed foodstuffs might not be so good for us. The move toward more wholesome foods got some pushback and inspired some peculiar advertising; I remember one store’s display of granola bars under a thought-provoking banner reading, “Tastes too good to be natural!” Some people wanted nothing to do with whole wheat. It just didn’t match what they “knew” about bread.

Yet even something as well-known as bread can have mysterious origins—as Jesus’ Jewish critics well knew. When the Israelites were lost and starving in the wilderness, God fed them with bread come down from heaven. That bread was so mysterious that the Israelites called it “manna”—from a Hebrew phrase meaning, “What is it?”

To survive in the wilderness, the Israelites had to embrace a mystery. And in order to embrace a mystery, they had to lay aside what they *knew*.

They *knew* that bread didn’t look like this, or taste like this, or show up every morning like dew on the grass. They had to lay all that aside and eat the manna anyway. Still, the challenges continued. They *knew* that what appears one day might disappear the next, so they tried to hoard the manna; but it spoiled and could not be eaten. They were *sure* the manna could not possibly carry them through a day of rest, so they tried to gather manna on the Sabbath; but it vanished and could not be gathered. To see the manna as it truly was, the Israelites had to lay aside what they “knew,” and listen for what God was saying to them. Only then could they be nourished as God intended.

That mysterious bread, come down from heaven, gave the Israelites life. In today's text, Jesus takes the mystery even farther, saying that *he* is the bread of life; that the bread of life is his flesh; and that whoever eats it will live forever.

How shall we embrace such mystery? What do we *know* that we must lay aside—about bread, about life, about humanity—to really hear what God is saying to us?

Nearly three hundred years ago, a crowd of religious refugees in Germany was transformed from a quarreling, sectarian bunch of Christ-seekers into the Spirit-filled Body of Christ. It happened on August 13, 1727, in the community they had come to call Herrnhut. Back that May, each household had signed a document in which they agreed to abide by a community code of conduct. Working backwards from that code, we can guess some of the things they'd been quarreling about. And we can guess that at the root of at least some of those quarrels were things people *knew*. *Knew for sure*.

Some residents of the community *knew* for sure what regulations were necessary to a service of worship: what customs, what fittings, what decorations. Others *knew*, with equal certainty, that worship services should look very different.

Some *knew* that certain days of the calendar must be set aside for religious commemoration. Others residents *knew*, just as surely, that it was not those particular days, but entirely different ones, and that the commemorations must be carried out in specific ways that their neighbors somehow *knew* were just the opposite of how things should be done.

Some *knew* that before taking communion, they must offer oral confession to a pastor; others *knew*, most assuredly, that such individual confessions were covered by communal prayer and therefore unnecessary.

Even today we're familiar with the arguments this kind of competing certainty provokes. But, looking over the Herrnhut agreement, we can imagine even more heated arguments inspired by what the residents knew, for sure, about each other.

They knew that some neighborhood craftsmen had registered with trade associations without informing other businessmen in the community. They knew that some young people were pledging to marry without consulting elders in the community. They knew that not everyone could be trusted to keep a secret. They knew that gossip was flying in every direction. They knew, if you can believe it, that a handy man or two in the community had a habit of not showing up for work at the day or time appointed. Everyone, we can presume, knew *someone else* who had behaved badly—knew them, and their daddy and momma besides. How hard it must have been, to lay all that aside, and embrace each other as a mystery.

But on August 13, that's what happened. During a service of Holy Communion, the whole congregation in Herrnhut was touched by the Holy Spirit, so tangibly, so powerfully, that all their previous convictions fell away in the presence of one great truth: "that God had been among them, and was among them still."¹ Embracing the mystery of God's presence, they embraced one another; and, as the bishops Hamilton write in their history of the church, "They were changed ... cleansed, and ready as never before for the work of God."

The Holy Communion itself is a mystery. As we approach this table, let us lay aside what we are quite sure we know—about God, and perhaps especially about each other—and listen for what God wants to say to us. Let us embrace the mystery, eat the bread of life, and be nourished for the work of God.

Amen.

¹ J. Taylor Hamilton and Kenneth G. Hamilton, *History of the Moravian Church: The Renewed Unitas Fratrum, 1722-1957* (Bethlehem PA: Moravian Church in America, 1967), p. 33.