

“The Beautiful Feast of Life.”

This is how my favorite theologians Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker refer to the sacrament of communion in their book *Saving Paradise*.

Communion, they say, or the eucharist, as it is also called, does not have to be about glorifying a violent death as somehow sanctioned by a sadistic God who wants us to suffer. Who insists on a violent act to save us from our own violent acts. In fact, the Gospel of John says exactly the opposite.

Communion, says the Gospel of John, or the eucharist (which means ‘thanksgiving’ in Greek), is about *life*!

And not just any kind of life. But the ‘*Zoe*’ kind of life that I have spoken of in previous sermons related to the discourse on the Feeding of the Five Thousand in the Gospel of John. *Zoe* meaning ‘the life principle.’ Or life as an unending cycle of birth and death and rebirth and death and rebirth.

John’s Gospel even goes so far as to call communion (or the eucharist) *abundant* life. About finally figuring out how to live together in *peace* in this great garden God has given us.

From the very beginning.

With Jesus, himself, as “the Bread of *Life*.” Which is the way he describes himself in our lectionary text this morning, in a passage that very likely reflects some of the very earliest eucharistic practices.

Jesus tells us we will “live forever” when we eat this bread of life. That it is even better than the manna in the wilderness God provided to our ancestors. That it is the beautiful feast we were always meant to have. In a lush Paradise brimming with fruit and birds and rivers and trees. Every part of it meant for our pleasure. Every part of it meant to sustain life. Not take it.

You know, the *garden. Eden*. Where the tree of life grows. And where—don’t we wish we didn’t know it—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil grows.

You know the story: Adam and Eve . . . a snake . . . a fall . . . and then nakedness, banishment, brutality . . . mortality.

All because we now know evil.

Perhaps even more than we now know good.

The problem with our humanity is that the good thing we have been given by God in this garden of life just doesn’t seem quite good *enough* on its own.

And so we eat of that blasted tree.

And we have been paying for it ever since.

It is confusing, I will admit.

Because according to the Book of Proverbs we are *supposed* to be seeking the Wisdom of God. A wisdom that is better than gold or silver or any other form of wealth.

And according to the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom is there, in that garden, at the beginning of creation, like a master worker, like a delighted child, “hewing the seven pillars” on which the ancients believed the earth was founded, right there with God: planting the tree of life, delighting in the human race, and then planting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

From which we are *not* supposed to eat.

And from whose fruits we have experienced so much pain.

And yet we *are* supposed to be seeking wisdom!

According to Genesis, there is a “crafty” serpent enticing Eve and then Adam to eat the fruits of this tree, even when we shouldn’t. But according to Proverbs, Wisdom is also there, from the beginning, shouting at the crossroads, commanding Adam and Eve to seek her at all costs.

And I don’t know about you, but I have a hard time distinguishing between the craftiness of the serpent and the shouting of Lady Wisdom.

As the Apostle Paul puts it, the very thing I would not do, I do. And the very thing I would do, I do not do. And much of the time I am not at all sure if what I would do, or what I would not do, is the wisest thing to do!

And I am guessing you have that problem, too.

So we all join Adam and Even in this paradise of creation God has designed for us to enjoy, feasting on the tree of life, but utterly confused and somewhat demoralized by the tree of Wisdom.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The tree that has fallen into such disrepute.

Do we eat? Or don’t we?

That is still the question.

The problem—I think—with Adam and Eve and the snake and the fall is *not* that they—and we—seek the wisdom of God. It is that they—and we—think we should be able to eat the *fruits* of wisdom before we have tended the *roots* of wisdom.

Because the consequences of knowing evil are too much for us when we eat before we are ready for the responsibility.

And God knows it.

This is why we have communion. The Beautiful Feast of Life. To tend to the roots of God’s wisdom while we feast on the fruits.

“Wisdom has built her house,” the writer of Proverbs says in our lectionary text today. “She has mixed her wine and set her table.” And she is still calling. “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity, and live, and walk in the way of insight.”

To me that sounds just a little bit like Jesus. Okay, a lot like Jesus. The bread of life. The cup of saving love. The Word of God—and some would say the *Wisdom* of God—made flesh in our midst.

Finding a way to feed five thousand in a fractured economy. Calling all who are simple and all who are wise to come together at the table. And walk in the way of insight. The way we were meant to all along. With just a little piece of bread and a little cup of juice. In a beautiful feast of life. To share with everyone we meet. We who are in the mainline Protestant churches tend to celebrate this feast on the first Sunday of the month, often sharing a loaf lovingly baked by a faithful parishioner. Offered emphatically—in this church at least—to *anyone* who is hungry, no matter who you are or where you come from.

Simple or wise or somewhere in between. And tasting a small drop of the cup of saving love. Just enough to sustain us in the Spirit through whatever trials may come our way.

The early church did it a bit differently. Not better or worse. Just different.

It was more like a potluck. Right in the middle of worship. Every Sunday.

After the sermon, they would bring their offering, just like we do. They were committed to sharing their common wealth. So they brought money, just like we do.

But then they also brought a great variety of food. Grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, pears, apples, mulberries, peaches, cherries, almonds, and plums. And flowers. Roses and lilies. The blossoming fruit from the Tree of Life (the Tree of *Zoe*) that grows without end.

The first part of their liturgy was much like ours: singing psalms, reading Scripture, praying, preaching. (With sermons that lasted a whole lot longer than 15 or 20 minutes!)

But when the sermon was over, those who were not yet officially baptized into the Body of Christ were dismissed. It was the belief of the community that these confirmands were still tending to the roots of Wisdom. They were not yet ready, they believed, for the fruits.

Those who had already endured the rigorous ritual preparation for Baptism *were* ready for the fruits. They had trained their minds and their bodies and their spirits to resist evil and turn toward the good. But even still they believed they needed help to resist the evil they saw swirling around them.

And so they anointed themselves anew before the feast. Their eyes, ears, and hands transformed every Sunday with oil and water and wine. It was a way of training their senses of sight and sound and touch and even smell.

In the ways of justice and peace. In the ways of non-violence. In the ways of Jesus, the Wisdom of God made flesh.

The beautiful feast of life that was their communion became a weekly workout of honestly seeking Wisdom, of laying aside immaturity, of learning how to walk in the way of insight. The beautiful feast of life that was their communion became a weekly reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant. Bathing in the grace of the Wisdom of God, yes. But also responding to that grace by cultivating ethical action in tending that garden. *With Wisdom*. The way it was meant to be all along.

Now you could hear all of this and wonder in horror if I am about to argue for a closed communion table here at First United. I am not. Jesus fed five thousand with five loaves and two fish and nowhere does it say he demanded a baptismal certificate. If Judas and Peter can feast at this table, so can you and I and anyone else who needs to eat.

What I *am* saying is that I think we have something we can learn from the early church about the rigors of our preparation for this beautiful feast of life. At least if we are intentional about what we are missing in those three or four Sundays “in-between” our regular communion Sundays. If we remember that our worship is somehow “incomplete” without it.

What I am saying is that I think we should imagine ourselves on those “in-between Sundays” as something like those catechumens in the early church. Still “in preparation” for this Beautiful Feast of Life. Still immersed in a rigorous training program of relinquishing of all that is violent within ourselves. Still tending the roots of God’s Wisdom growing deep within us. In order that we might partake of the fruits of God’s wisdom among us in the Beautiful Feast of Life that is to come.

Letting go of the violence within us that would violate that garden. Training our senses in the ways of non-violence. Because Wisdom is still calling. And Jesus is still waiting. To welcome us all to the banquet where we will finally—and forever—live in peace.

And in the meantime, we prepare.

I pray it may be so.

Amen.