Worship I

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[0:00] There are those that talk about coincidence. and it is let's accept that just for the moment.

! Let's just call it a coincidence that in the cycle of sermons that Bishop Dave set up for the summer. Today we come to the third thing in Acts 2.42. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship of the breaking of the bread and the prayers.
And today we've come to the third one, the breaking of the bread. So it's obviously just a pure coincidence that the scripture readings out of the regular lectionary were what you heard this morning.
Exodus and the manna in the wilderness. Jesus saying that I am the bread of heaven. And the second reading is not a coincidence. I switched the second reading.
[1:08] It was an epistle that was different than the one that was in the lectionary. But I didn't pay any attention to the first and the third reading. And to tell you the truth, it's just the coincidence that when I step up today and I listen to this, that these things are set up.

And this is an example, I think, of how the Holy Spirit orchestrates various events. It's a small little thing, maybe not big to you, but it says something to me.
We're continuing to talk about one theme all summer long, and it is Acts 2.42. That's the scripture verse that Bishop Dave picked for the theme on the role of the local church.
And today we're going to talk about that third one, the breaking of the bread. Today we'll move on to that is they devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread.
Now, this particular expression, the breaking of bread, is used in a couple of places in the Bible. And each time it is used, we understand it to refer in the New Testament to the Last Supper, where Jesus ate with his disciples on the night before he died.
[2:24] In addition to being used in Acts 2.42, which is the scripture that Bishop Benna used for a theme, have we all memorized it by now or getting there? There's a second reference to the breaking of bread in the book of Acts in chapter 20, verse 7.

And Acts 20, verse 7 reads like this. On the first day of the week, when they were gathered together to break bread, and then it goes on to talk about a whole bunch of stuff of what happened on that day.
And don't focus on what happened that day. That's not the point of saying this just now. But focus on how the writer uses the expression, the breaking bread.
It's shown there just to show the context of how this happened. It's not really focusing on breaking bread itself. This scripture seems to be something that was well understood by all of the listeners. Oh, it was on the first day of the week when they came to break bread, then such and such and such and such happened. And the writer, Luke, doesn't seek to explain it in any way at all.
[3:40] It's as if the early readers of Acts would well understood that this was a regular practice in the early church, this breaking of bread which happened on the first day of the week on Sundays.

There's another scripture written also by Luke. And keep in mind, Acts of the Apostles was written by Luke, and the Gospel of Luke, not unsurprisingly, was written by Luke.
Luke 42, 13 through 34. And this is the account that you folks know real well, anybody who knows their Bible. This is this post-resurrection account of Jesus encountering two disciples of his on the road as they left Jerusalem on the very day, the Sunday, when Jesus rose from the dead.
These two disciples had apparently been with the apostles over the weekend of the crucifixion and the Passover. And sometime on Sunday, after several of the apostles had reported to them about Jesus being raised, they left Jerusalem to walk to a nearby town by the name of Emmaus.
And on the road, they encountered this guy. But they didn't know who he was. They didn't recognize him. Notwithstanding that they spent probably hours with him talking to them and talking about the scriptures, about how the Messiah would be crucified and would rise.

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[5:06] And so I want to pick up right at the end of that in Luke 42. So anyway, they get together, they're at table. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them.

And their eyes were opened and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. And they said to one another, Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?
And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem. And they found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, saying, The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Simon. Then they, meaning the two, told what had happened on the road and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.
Notice one very interesting thing about this account. There's a lot of stuff in here, but I just want to focus really on one thing. The breaking of the bread somehow accompanied Jesus' revelation of his identity to these two disciples.
[6:18] We don't know quite how it happened, but with all of the teaching that he gave them and all of the back and forth discussion that he had with them, they didn't know who this guy was. It was not until he broke bread for them that they recognized him.

This tells us some important truth about this breaking bread, which we do at communion here on Sundays. It is a critical way in which Jesus somehow reveals himself to us.
Now, we're not going to celebrate the Eucharist today. Another little irony in life, because Bishop Dave is gone. This time he's down in Connecticut doing a visitation there, and he'll be back with us. And you won't have to listen to me for the rest of the summer, because he'll be doing the sermons for the whole rest of the summer. But think about how in communion Jesus reveals himself to you.
Now, for the first century Jew, breaking bread was something that they did once a year at Passover in a very special way. And they were very familiar with this expression.
[7:27] If you look in Exodus 12, you'll see bread mentioned as part of the Passover meal. That's when they slaughtered the Paschal lamb and ate the lamb with unleavened bread.

But there's no reference in that Exodus passage to breaking the bread. But by the time of Jesus' day, each family no longer killed their lambs like they did at the time of the Exodus, and for many years after that.
By then, most families did not have flocks of sheep or lambs or goats, but rather they bought their lamb in the market, just as you buy your meat today. Today, you don't go and kill a cow in order to eat a steak.
You go to the supermarket and you buy the meat already prepared. And that was the way urban dwelling Jews of Jesus' day largely did it. So by 30 AD, the focus on the Passover Seder was not so much on the lamb, although the lamb was part of the Passover meal, but much of the emphasis was on bread and wine.
I don't know if some of you are here long enough to remember, years ago, our predecessor church, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, we would occasionally during Holy Week celebrate a Christian Passover Seder.
[8:47] The Jewish Passover meal is full of symbolism for the Christian. Perhaps now that we've got our own building and that we've got tables and a kitchen and all the stuff, we'll do that again maybe this next year.

And in that, we could explain all of the symbolism for how it ties in. But that's for another day. I'm not going to do all that. Today, we will look at just one small part of the Passover meal and what it meant in Jesus' day.
Jesus transformed it into what we now call the Eucharist, Eucharist, which is our distinctive focus point for all of our worship services.
The Passover meal had three ritual pieces of unleavened bread, which were eaten during the service, and there were four glasses of wine, which were part of the meal.
All of these were eaten and drunk in the midst of several sets of very long prayers, which were said. Now, the second of the Passover breads was called the Afakomen.
[9:52] There's a big debate about exactly what that means among the rabbis. I was reading some of the commentary on it. It doesn't matter for our sake. But the Afakomen, they don't really seem to understand this second piece of bread.

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But this second bread is broken during the meal, and immediately after it's eaten, it is wrapped in a little linen cloth, and it is hidden during the Passover service.
And later during the meal, it's brought out, and then it's eaten. Now, when Christians celebrate a Passover Seder these days, it is common to see the Trinity in these three breads, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
The fact that the second bread is broken and hidden is seen as a representative of Jesus. As the second person of the Trinity, he was broken on the cross, wrapped in a linen shroud, and buried in a tomb.
And of course, he rose from the dead and was revealed to his disciples, and then to the whole world. This Passover meal was eaten by the Jews only once a year.
[11:02] But with what Jesus said at the Last Supper before his death, the early Christian church almost immediately transferred it from a once-a-year event to a once-a-week event.

And they celebrated it on Sunday, since that was the day of the week on which Jesus rose from the dead. Remember, the Sabbath was Friday night sunset to Saturday night sunset.
But the early Christians just immediately started celebrating their Sabbath on Sunday because of Jesus' resurrection. And this breaking of this bread is what we do every week in the Eucharist.
The weekly celebration of the Eucharist on Sundays was given for the early church. So we don't really... It was a given. We don't see the New Testament arguing about it or talking about it.
They just plain did it. 1 Corinthians 11, 23-32 is today's epistle reading. And I switched the epistle reading so it would be this one.
[12:05] And this epistle is written by the Apostle Paul. It was one of his earliest epistles. It was probably... The scholars think it was written around 55 AD. And it is the only scripture in the New Testament, apart from the Gospels, where we have a physical description of the Last Supper with Jesus in the upper room the night before his crucifixion.

So it is the oldest written account of what we have. It's written maybe 10 to 20 years before the three accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
Interestingly, John doesn't have a Eucharist account, although it does have that bread of life thing that you heard in the reading that Jesus said at that Last Supper, but it doesn't have a description of the Last Supper.
So here in 1 Corinthians, Paul describes it in this very old account, maybe 20 years, 25 years after it actually happened.
For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you. In other words, Paul is saying he wasn't there, but he heard about this from the Lord. What I delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body for you.
[13:34] Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way, he also took the cup after supper, saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me.

For as often as you drink this bread, eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. That is the description of what we do when we break the bread.
We've got prayers before and after it, but at its essence, that is the core of worship on a Sunday morning for us as Christians. Then Paul goes on to issue a pretty stern warning about how solemn we should take this act of worship.
We don't read this very much, but it's maybe worth a little listen to. Whoever therefore, it starts in verse 27 of chapter 12, whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.
Let a person examine himself. Then and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.
[14:56] That is why many of you are weak and ill and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, truly we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

Kind of a scary little admonition. It's a warning. And what I want you to take from it today is how very seriously Jesus intends or Paul intends speaking for God that this is to be taken very, very seriously.

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Now, I got to confess, most of this message today is really a teaching and not a sermon. And so I'd like to just personalize a bit of my reflections on what we do on Sunday morning at the Eucharist when we do this breaking of bread.
When I walk up to do this, to take this bread and to drink this wine, there is a really interesting, funny closeness to Jesus that is a little hard to describe.
His words at the Last Supper about eat my flesh in the bread and drink my blood in the wine are almost chilling. I know that when I'm in the other end of this as a lay reader and I look into the cup and I see that wine and I pass it to somebody to drink, that I'm looking at the most holy and sacred fluid on this planet.
[16:29] There is simply nothing quite like it that we do. Every experience that we have in life is something which on one level or another, every creature can do except for this one.

All creatures, whether man or beast, engage in many things that created beings do. We eat, drink, play, work, sleep, have sex, have babies, are kind or mean to others, we get sick, we die, we do everything that we see men and women or for that matter cats and dogs doing.
Except this one. To take this bread and to drink this cup is a completely different sort of act than anything else that there is. The only thing that's a little like this is the act of baptism when we're committing to Jesus or, as in most of our cases, when our parents are acting to commit us to Jesus with the hope that we will come and commit ourselves to him when we are of age.
But baptism is a one-shot deal. This breaking bread and drinking the cup connects us to Jesus in his death and is something which we can do and should do over and over.
And it's an act which ratifies the covenant that we have made with Jesus in our lives. And in this, it's a reminder of the promise of life in him for all time.
[18:04] And it's no wonder that the early church used this phrase, they devoted themselves to this, and we should too. It's sort of the supreme act of worshiping God.

If we do it unthinking or in an unworthy way, it will do nothing for us or perhaps worse. Yet it's not some magical event.
It is our act of worship of God to recommit ourselves to him. It should be something that we desire each week on a Sunday morning in which with the other acts of worship we do here, the prayers and so on, we are very loathe to skip.
If we do this, we're not going to church on a Sunday morning, but rather, as it says in Acts 2.42, we are devoted to the breaking of the bread.
Now next week, Bishop Dave is going to round out and fill in what I've missed on this. So, let us pray and ask that the Lord kindle in our hearts what this means to break bread in Jesus' name.

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