



“Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ”: Practicing Life Abundant

I grew up in a large Presbyterian congregation about an hour’s drive from Princeton. I loved this church and took advantage of every opportunity it offered. But the meaning of years of youthful worship crystallized most clearly for me at a meal where I was the only Christian. When I was a junior in high school, I was invited to a Passover Seder at the home of a Conservative Jewish friend. This family was wonderfully hospitable to me and delighted to teach me about every detail of the Seder. There was also a hint of friendly challenge: I clearly remember the father (whose learning greatly impressed me) comparing this Seder to a gospel account of the last supper. He pointed out enough similarities to help me recognize the connection and enough differences to suggest that he thought the gospel writers had not reported everything as it really happened. A few days later, Martha, his daughter and my friend, went with me to the Maundy Thursday service at Trinity Presbyterian Church. The thrill of explaining to her what was going on in the service was electrifying; never had I seen so clearly how wonderful and amazing that night is. I was simultaneously chagrined, however, that several adults stared and frowned as I did my teaching. I realize now, as I realized even then to some extent, that these adults were seeing not deep interfaith conversation but rather two teenagers whispering in church. Still, the contrast with Martha’s warm and instructive father startled me.

This event was my second confirmation, in a sense. It was a fruition of the Christian education I had had thus far, an event that showed me not only that I had been received into the Christian faith but also that I was now responsible for caring for and interpreting it. It also placed my Christian identity into the larger context of pluralism, where I discovered it would neither break under the challenge of difference nor destroy the good will of people whose beliefs were different from my own. I think this was a key moment in my vocational development, clarifying both my calling to the Christian life, whose meaning I now perceived more clearly, and my calling to study, teach, and preach.

Breaking Bread

The hymn whose title I have borrowed for these lectures also links vocation and the table. The hymn’s first stanza suggests that our talents and tongues are to be used

right here, in this worship service where we are singing this hymn, at this one table where bread is broken and wine is poured. By the third stanza, however, it is clear that we are also being sent out, “bearing fruit in a world of doubt”: telling love, sharing bread, encountering God (Immanuel) everywhere. As we sing this hymn—its very title a little prayer—we accept a vocation, not to one job or another but to the Christian life itself. This is a vocation that can be fulfilled in many jobs, including playing the oboe and repairing boats. Wherever we live this vocation, the hymn implies, we find ourselves invited into a way of life abundant, a way of life where loaves of bread abound, and baskets of love as well. (When the prodigal came to himself and determined to return to a home whose abundance he had squandered, he remembered that even his father’s hired hands had “bread enough and to spare.” (Luke 15:17) In that house, of course, mercy enough and to spare would greet him as well.

What can be more fundamental to a way of life than how it deals with food? We human beings are embodied; we need physical nourishment, and when we don’t get it, we die. This is a reality that has pressed in upon humankind throughout history and that is never far from the consciousness of a great many people in the world today. Perhaps a lurking sense of vulnerability explains why eating—how, what, with whom, where—is so often a keystone of cultural and personal identity.

If all that matters is that we get sufficient calories, then the culture of late capitalism has named us as we should be named: we are consumers. We take in material stuff, use most of it up, and excrete an unmentionable remainder. If we can do so with little fuss and in little time, all the better, for then we can get back to work, having fueled up, though without having shared a meal. You could “live” for years on the food you can buy at gas stations these days (and these nights—such places never close, just in case we “need” some potato chips or pop in the middle of the night).

Obviously, much more is at stake at table than meeting nutritional requirements. More than food is always on the menu when we eat, and whether a meal is sweet or bitter depends on many things other than what’s in our bowl or on our plate.

As I continue this exploration of a way of life abundant in the midst of a culture distracted by lifestyles of abundance, I want to focus on a single Christian practice: the Christian practice that orders our producing, preparing, ingesting, and renouncing of food. Contemporary American culture is confused about food, and distortion here causes suffering all over this shrinking planet. In this context of urgent need, the Christian community has a great deal of relevant wisdom to offer, deep in our tradition, in our hearts, and in our shared forms of life. This wisdom can provide resources for building one another up in a way of life abundant, for guiding youth into it, and for serving a world in need. This wisdom is embedded in the Christian practice that orders our eating, the practice I shall call “breaking bread.” As we become more aware of this practice, we and the youth we serve may more readily discern the con-

tours of the way of life for which we yearn.

A Christian Practice: Pizza Yes, but More Than Pizza

First, some terms.¹ A “practice,” in this understanding, is much bigger than an “act.” Each practice addresses a fundamental human need, and thus it appears in every culture, though its specific enactments may vary. Like all things human, practices are always entangled in the particularities of specific times and places; they are social and cultural, taught and learned within communal forms of life. Nothing big enough to be called a “practice” is ever sheerly local, however. Practices necessarily endure across many generations, adapting to change; they have a history, and they also have a future, whose specific shape can hardly be imagined. When our practices are transformed in Christ, they do not shed their cultural specificity any more than we ourselves can. Rather, they find their true vocation as responses to the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

In the first lecture, I talked about playing the oboe. We can imagine a way of life abundant that includes no oboes; we could play sitars or drums instead, or make music enough with our own vocal cords and hands. Playing the oboe is not a practice; if the oboe had never been invented, we could still, somehow, live full lives. When music never resounds, however, human life is diminished. Across the centuries, Christians have consistently participated in the practice Don Saliers calls “singing our lives to God,” a practice that is a necessary component of a way of life abundant.² Participating in this practice, we enter the paschal mystery with our breath and bodies, praising God in harmony with and in service to other people. Soon we learn that the stars are singing, too.

Similarly, we can imagine a way of life abundant that includes no pizza. If pizza had never been invented, we could still, somehow, invite youth into the way of life abundant that is available in Christ. The practice that is fundamental to our need and transformative of our culture’s relationship to food is not the pizza party; the relevant practice is the Christian practice of breaking bread. Yet the pizza parties and other meals you host are far from irrelevant when they become occasions for transformation within a specific local context.

At a weekend retreat, a group of recent high school graduates was sharing pizza and telling stories of those who had mentored them in faith. One young woman began to speak of her grandmother, who had recently died. Thanksgiving was always at Grandma’s house, she said. Losing her sense of time, she talked far longer than anyone else had, but no one seemed to mind; many of them had lost grandmothers, too. Besides, this grandmother had apparently known some good jokes and done some good things. As these young people offered similar stories of their own, one after another, they felt strong and loved and somehow less worried about life beyond high

school than they had been a little while before. "I never knew pizza could taste so much like turkey," someone said as they cleared the table. In a moment, the table was set once again, as the minister leading the retreat brought out bread and wine. As this group shared the Lord's Supper, many had a special sense of doing so in the midst of a communion of saints, some of whom had dear, familiar faces. Some even understood that at this table, death had lost its sting.

What stories might you tell of young people at table? Some of your stories would be less happy than this one; they might feature a young woman hiding her food in a napkin so as not to gain any weight, or a young man who cannot find a table companion in the high school cafeteria. The story might include only a tiny amount of food—a single candy bar discovered in a pocket that comes as manna to hikers lost in the woods overnight—or a memorable Christmas feast. The meal of which you tell might have occurred at a table where two cultures meet, as they often do when youth go on mission trips. At such tables, difference is plain, but so is the fundamental need for nourishment that is one sign of our kinship as embodied creatures.

Suppose we were to take hundreds of stories of youth at table and try to see them as something more than random acts of nutrition. Suppose we tried to think of them instead as episodes within one great story of life with and under God, a story whose theme is food. Telling this story, we would begin to sketch the natural history, the social history, and the salvation history of the Christian practice of breaking bread.

The story of this practice began, we might say, when God planted a garden and gave it to the humans to till and keep, that they might have food. The story's end, many of us believe, is a great banquet where all people will feast together. In between that planting and that promise, the plot thickens, as sin and hardship destroy the fullness and balance evident in these two scenes. In biblical stories, in our own daily lives, and in the global village, appetites become disordered and harm comes from the indiscriminate eating of some. (Genesis 3) Famine, a stubborn recurrence across the generations, sent Jacob and his sons to Egypt long ago (Genesis 41-46); it afflicts lands south of Egypt today. Greed and the class and social structures that institutionalize it corrupt how food is distributed and shared, granting different people different places and amounts at the tables of the world, as the rich man and Lazarus knew so well. (Luke 16:19-31)

If we were to survey the history of Christian communities, we would find that certain forms of life have emerged as believers tried to live faithfully in this time between the Garden and the Great Banquet. These forms, too, resonate with biblical stories. Many emerged from Judaism or were shaped by the local forms of cultures now long dead. For example, the liturgical year, which evolved over several centuries, has lent a meaningful order to the eating patterns of some Christian communities, commending fasts at certain times and encouraging feasts at others. Within these

rhythms experienced in the very mouth and belly, many Christians relive and incorporate into their own bodies stories of birth, wilderness wandering, death, and resurrection as they recur each year in the church calendar.³ Another important social form through which Christian people across the centuries have prayed that Christ would transform what might be seen as fueling into a Christian practice of breaking bread is the table grace. In this everyday act of thanking God for each meal, remembering the hungry, and asking that what we eat will be blessed to our use as we live in service to others, we tell the truth about what is on our plates. Potluck suppers, soup kitchens, Anabaptist love feasts, fasts to protest war, and youth group pizza parties—all are specific social forms that arose within their own cultural settings as Christians ate together, wrapped in Christ, partaking of God's gifts, responding to God's grace. All of these are part of a single practice, and all belong to the same big story. Indeed, all emanate from the table at the center of the church's life (to which we soon will turn, but not yet).

As you think of a time when you have shared a meaningful meal with young people, where do you see connections to biblical stories of food and to the long history of the Christian practice of breaking bread? Did the meal you have in mind take place in a garden or in a wilderness? Was it a celebrative banquet? Was it ruined by disordered appetites or unmet need? Was it a feast? Was it a deliberate and spiritually nourishing fast? Did it take place during ordinary time, when everyone had just enough, like the manna-fed children of Israel? (Exodus 16)

A practice is borne by stories. Stories shape our deepest convictions about how things are, who we are, and what kind of world we live in—convictions at the heart of all our practices. I often hear Christian educators bemoaning the fact that the youth and families they seek to serve are hard to reach because “they just don't know the stories.” There is no way to avoid this challenge. Teach them! Do it in fun ways, over food. There is no getting around this if they are to know Christian faith and life. Beyond the stories, moreover, there are some complex concepts, including some that have been explored by theologians or set forth in church doctrine. From whence do our provisions come? With whom ought we to eat? How much is enough? Each question could be addressed in a children's book or in a lengthy and difficult theological treatise.

The practice of breaking bread is not only a set of stories and concepts, however. It is also a set of social arrangements and institutions: it includes a complex web of places where food is produced, means of getting food to market, and arrangements for who will be the cook and who will clean up, who will get the drumstick and who will get only the scraps, at the family table and in the global village. Power is inescapably woven into these arrangements and institutions, to the disadvantage of those who hunger most. Our stories and our trust in God, however, assure us that

social arrangements and institutions can be resisted or changed. The laws of the ancient Israelites required them to leave grain in the furrows and corners of the fields when they gathered their harvest and to restore farmland to debtors in every fiftieth year (Deuteronomy 24:19-22 and Leviticus 25, though it is not clear that they actually did the latter). Today, food redistribution and long-term economic development initiatives can address world hunger, and food pantries, food stamps, and long-term economic development initiatives can address hunger in Newark and Chicago and Atlanta (it is even less clear that we are doing these). Concern about public policies regarding food is an important dimension of the Christian practice of breaking bread, as important as the character of the family table. Thinking of both as part of a single practice, together with the eating we do when gathered at church, helps us to make connections across the disjointed spheres of a fragmented society.

A practice is taught and learned, most often, in the course of everyday life. Usually the teaching and learning is barely intentional, occurring in the midst of cooking and blessing and eating, but sometimes careful instruction takes place. I have taught my children how to set the table; they have taught me that broccoli is disgusting. As the practice takes shape in a particular community, certain skills and knowledge come in handy, including table etiquette, rudimentary cooking skills, and a sense of what foods fit what occasions. From there, practitioners can progress to higher levels of proficiency, including the excellence that is characterized by especially care-full attention to the properties of reality as they appear in vegetables, meats, and spices. Specific virtues are also beneficial to those who practice breaking bread: frugality, generosity, self-restraint.

A practice such as this covers a big swath of life. Within a social and intellectual context in which connections among the various parts of our lives are often severed or obscured—connections between thinking and doing, domesticity and public life, liturgy and social justice—reflecting on a practice of this scope and pervasiveness helps us to make connections. It also makes it possible to think critically and constructively about something as all-encompassing as a way of life. That for which we yearn and to which we are called is so big it is hard even to comprehend. Moreover, many of the methods we have of getting at the issues involved (a program here, a retreat there) are so small that they can seem scattered and diffuse. Thinking about a way of life by attending to a practice of this size lets us gather up fragments and see the connections.⁴

A Way of Life around the Table

One practice does not make an entire way of life, of course. A way of life abundant is woven of many practices, each dependent for its flourishing on the soundness of the others. The authors of *Practicing Our Faith* named twelve Christian practices,

each an enduring component of Christian living that is endangered in contemporary society: honoring the body, hospitality, household economics, saying yes and saying no, keeping sabbath, discernment, testimony, shaping communities, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing our lives to God.⁵ Hospitality to strangers, especially those in need, is one of the most enduring and characteristic Christian practices, for example. Clearly, patterns of eating that make no room for hospitality to strangers cannot be considered Christian.⁶ Similarly, the Christian practice of breaking bread acknowledges the table—at home, at work, at school, at church—as a place not only for food but also for language. As in the Bible and in Christian worship, so everywhere: word and meal go hand in hand. The Christian practice of breaking bread thrives in the presence of the Christian practice of testimony. Likewise, the Christian practice of keeping sabbath provides the time we need to break bread together—and the joyful breaking of bread, at home and in worship, helps us to keep sabbath. Forgiveness, healing, household economics, honoring the body, shaping communities: all are Christian practices that intersect with breaking bread in ways that disclose its character as a practice within which Christian people do things together over time to address fundamental human needs in the light of and in response to God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ.

All of these practices converge in the meal that is at the center of the church's life. It is always a risk to speak of this meal in ecumenical settings. I wonder even now which of the several names to use here, in acknowledgment of important disagreements between church bodies about the meaning and conduct of the meal. We share much more than divides us, however; and nothing that I can say will be adequate to the mystery of this feast in any case. Therefore, in freedom, I go ahead.

Holy Communion is not itself a practice, but rather the sacramental place and time within which all of the other Christian practices are nourished and strengthened. Let us consider how other practices are woven into the Lord's Supper, crystallized there in a ritual form that discloses their most full and gracious meaning, nourishing us to live them more faithfully when we have eaten and drunk.

At this table, we honor the body of the crucified and risen One and with it all the vulnerable bodies of humankind. We take into our own bodies the body that was and is broken and with it all the pain of the world's bodies, which Jesus took upon himself. We also take into ourselves the body of Christ risen, wounded still but victorious even so.

We give testimony, proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes.

We are forgiven. Before we eat, as we pray the prayer Jesus taught, we remember what that means about the forgiving we have to do.

We receive hospitality at the table where Christ is both host and feast, arriving as guests and departing to be hosts to others in need.

We experience the transformation of time, which is so often out of kilter in our lives. We are simultaneously in an upper room long ago, at a heavenly banquet, and right here with our fellow worshipers, all of us part of a magnificent drama.

We support one another in dying well. Death is right here, in the body broken, in the execution tomorrow, and we trust God anyway.

We receive community as a gift that comes to us in spite of our brokenness, not an accomplishment that depends on our worthiness.

We find ourselves in a household whose economics are ordered by God. Simple, everyday food becomes the main course at a banquet. Everyone gets the same amount, and it is enough.

Most of all, in this meal the transformation that wraps all our activities in Christ is given. Christ's presence, and the presence of others whom he also loves and calls us to love, is here embodied, as we who are embodied eat and drink with companions and with Christ. These real elements and the flesh-and-blood community gathered at this table contrast with the Internet connections that increasingly structure youth's patterns of belonging. Consider the eloquent answer to Question 76 in the Heidelberg Catechism, which was first published in 1563 as an effort to mediate Lutheran and Reformed theology and worship. "What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his shed blood?"

It is not only to embrace with a trusting heart the whole passion and death of Christ, and by it to receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. In addition, it is to be so united more and more to his blessed body by the Holy Spirit dwelling both in Christ and in us that, although he is in heaven and we are on earth, we are nevertheless flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, always living and being governed by one Spirit, as the members of our bodies are governed by one soul.⁷

The British theologian David Ford has written that the only way to understand the gift of the Lord's body and blood is through "apprenticeship in practical mastery."⁸ How can we go about apprenticing young people at this table, as I was blessed to be apprenticed sometime before the Maundy Thursday of my junior year in high school?⁹ And what would it mean for us as adults and for the hungry parents of the youth we serve to continue as mutual apprentices at table with the risen Lord? Scholars say this is what happened in the early church. With no buildings, committees, or programs to run, what was utterly central was the meal of thanksgiving, remembrance, and promise shared on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection. When Christians gathered, they ate together, they experienced the presence of Christ, and they figured out together what this meant for the rest of the week.¹⁰

This table is the place of nourishment for a way of life abundant. Accepting the

freedom of this way and sharing it in life together for the sake of the whole world, we find that our random acts of nutrition have been transformed into the Christian practice of breaking bread. Taken in their many all-week-long dimensions, the Christian practice of breaking bread and all the other practices are not add-ons to life; they are life itself. They are not programs or committee assignments, but the substance of life together in the church and at home and at school and in public life. We are already doing them, even though we do so imperfectly. Often, however, we forget to open our eyes to the gifts that are all around us.

So what shall we do? Recognizing these gifts won't remove the obstacles to a way of life abundant. But it will be a beginning. Take the first step, as you discern it to be needful and possible in your particular context, in your family, or in your ministry. And then take the next one. Christ is calling. "Uhm, we have nothing here but five loaves and two fish," we mumble with the disciples. In John's Gospel, a youth offers what he has without mumbling. Jesus takes this food, and in his hands and by his blessing, loaves abound. (John 6:1-14) Start somewhere.

People are hungry. ▼▲

NOTES

1. The understanding of practices employed here is drawn from Dorothy C. Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), which advocates twelve Christian practices as the constituents of a life-giving way of life. Breaking bread is not one of these twelve; I explore it here partly for that reason. Craig Dykstra has been a constant conversation partner during the development of my thinking on practices. Don Richter, my associate in the Valparaiso Project, has also been a crucial conversation partner. Susan Briehl, who has written a chapter on the Christian practice of breaking bread for a forthcoming book on worship and practices, edited by Thomas G. Long, has helped me to understand this practice.
2. Chapter thirteen in *Practicing Our Faith*.
3. Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000), pp. 79-114, includes a summary of the liturgical year and the other annual patterns of life, with considerable attention to the place of food therein.
4. Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1999), pp. 66-67.
5. The authors did not claim that this list was complete, though they did try to identify practices that address a wide range of fundamental human needs.
6. On this practice, see Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality As a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).
7. The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part I, *Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), p. 40.
8. David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 142.
9. My colleague Don Richter has offered some suggestions for helping youth to grow in the Christian prac-

tice of breaking bread.

a. Advocate for family mealtimes. Studies show that one of the most important developmental assets for teens is sharing regular family meals together. See Eugene C. Roelkepartain, *Building Assets in Congregations: A Practical Guide for Helping Youth Grow Up Healthy* (Minneapolis, MN: Search Institute, 1998). If this is not possible on a daily basis, encourage youth to lobby for at least one time per week for a sit-down meal with family members. Suggest that teens be responsible for preparing a family meal on a regular monthly or weekly basis. Make catered meals available at church functions so families can dine together.

b. Teach teens how to cook. Most church buildings have kitchens, or you could meet in the home of someone with a spacious kitchen. Give practical hands-on lessons for preparing nutritious meals. Discuss the history of different foods as you cook. Prepare and serve a banquet as the culminating culinary event.

c. Bake bread together. While mixing ingredients, compare how the act of making bread together resembles the act of sharing life together as a faith community. For example: Which members of our congregation are like salt or flour? What helps us "rise" as a community? Who are our daily companions, i.e. those with whom we share bread? Use the bread for a communion service.

d. Offer an alternative Sunday school class that meets at a local bagel shop. Teach teens that any place they gather is an appropriate place to discuss the life of faith.

e. Go to a large city. Begin with breakfast at an elegant restaurant, then have lunch at a diner, and supper at a soup kitchen (helping prepare and serve the meal). Reflect together on the quality of these different eating experiences.

f. Click on www.thehungersite.org each day to donate food. Challenge youth to investigate the causes of hunger in famine-stricken places featured on this web site.

g. Invite teens to keep a list of all packaging used for food items they consume during the course of one week. Bring the lists (or the packaging itself) to group for discussion.

h. Place a liturgical calendar in a visible place in the youth room at church. Color code dates for fasting and feasting. Consider fitting ways to observe fasting and feasting individually and corporately.

10. A new, engaging study is John Koenig's *The Feast of the World's Redemption: Eucharistic Origins and Christian Mission* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000).