

Sunday Column: Real Bread, Real Stories

Week 3 – Encountering Grace in Worship, Study, and Daily Life

Faith Behind Our Vision (Theological Themes)

- *God sharing our bodily human life in Jesus – Incarnation*
- *Christ meeting and nourishing us through Holy Communion – Sacramental theology*
- *God forming us through Holy Communion, worship, Scripture, prayer, and acts of mercy – Wesleyan means of grace*
- *Sharing life in Christ across our differences – Ecclesiology*
- *Welcoming and caring for others around the table – Christian hospitality*

“We gather around real bread and real stories, uniting across differences in worship, study, and daily living.”

The third sentence of our vision places ordinary things at the center of our shared life: bread and stories. Bread feeds our bodies. Stories help us understand the people beside us. Both ask us to give attention to lives we cannot know from a greeting alone.

Christian faith gives us a reason to take these ordinary things seriously. John’s Gospel tells us that the Word became flesh and lived among us (John 1:14). We call this the *incarnation*: God entering human life in Jesus Christ. Jesus knew hunger and weariness. He ate with others and received their hospitality. Our bodily needs and the relationships formed around meals belong within the life God chose to share.

“Real bread” keeps that conviction close to our daily experience. People need something to eat. Food has to be prepared, tables made ready, and dishes washed afterward. A gathering depends on people willing to do that work. I think of our Community Thanksgiving Dinner and the many contributions that make it possible.

As its history has been shared with me, the church’s involvement began with providing a meal for those serving at the fire department. Over time, it grew into a broader community Thanksgiving dinner, with local participation and space provided by the resort. A meal offered to a particular group became a gathering that many people helped sustain.

Today, a couple of our church members serve as primary organizers, reaching out to local people and businesses for assistance and donations. Their commitment matters, and so does the generosity of everyone who responds. Our congregation participates in something whose history and present life belong to the wider community. The dinner gives us an opportunity to contribute while receiving what our neighbors offer.

When I read “we gather” in our vision, I think about this shared work. No one person can create the whole gathering. A request for help leads to another person’s contribution. The resort makes space available. Food and time are offered. Before anyone sits down to eat, relationships have already helped make the meal possible.

Bread also has a particular place in our worship. At Holy Communion, we receive bread and the cup as means of grace through which Christ meets and nourishes us. Paul connects our sharing in the one bread with our belonging to one body (1 Corinthians 10:16-17). We receive Christ’s gift alongside other people, and that shared receiving calls us to consider our responsibility toward them.

In Wesleyan theology, *means of grace* are practices through which God works in us and helps us grow in love. They include prayer, searching the Scriptures, and Holy Communion, as well as acts of mercy such as feeding people who are hungry and caring for those who are suffering. We participate with the expectation that we, too, may be changed. We may recognize an assumption we need to reconsider or learn to receive care from someone we expected to serve.

This helps explain why our vision holds worship, study, and daily living together. The grace we receive in worship shapes how we approach our neighbors. Our encounters with them bring new questions into prayer and Bible study. Over time, these practices can deepen our capacity to love.

Our Community Thanksgiving Dinner gives us a place to practice that mercy and hospitality. It has a different purpose from Holy Communion and welcomes people with different beliefs. Our Christian faith gives us reasons to help make the dinner possible without requiring everyone present to share our understanding. A neighbor’s hunger and desire for companionship deserve care in their own right. Sharing a meal matters whether or not someone later attends church.

“Real stories” asks us to bring the same attention to what people carry into the room. Thanksgiving does not feel the same to everyone. Someone may arrive grateful for a good year. Another may be facing the first holiday after a death or spending the day far from family. We may not know which is true of the person sitting beside us.

Making room for their story means allowing a conversation to take its own course. We can listen without requiring someone to sound cheerful or find a lesson in a difficult experience. We also respect their choice about what to share. Being welcome at the table should not depend on explaining why they came.

This kind of listening belongs in our study of Scripture, too. We read with the experiences we bring, and another person may notice something we have overlooked. Their questions

can send us back to the text with greater attention, while Scripture can challenge the way we have understood our own lives.

In Luke's account of the road to Emmaus, Jesus accompanies two disciples, hears their disappointed hopes, and opens the Scriptures with them before they recognize him in the breaking of bread (Luke 24:13-35). Their conversation and meal become part of an encounter with the risen Christ. I hear an invitation in that story to remain attentive to what can happen when we make time to walk, read, and eat together.

We practice this kind of learning in our Men's Group and Women's Bible Study, too. The Men's Group welcomes people connected to Girdwood Chapel and its congregation, whether or not they are church members. The Women's Bible Study also extends its invitation to the wider community. People bring different experiences of faith, familiarity with Scripture, and questions about life. Those differences can deepen the conversation when we give one another room to speak.

Establishing ground rules together at the beginning of each season helps make that openness possible. Participants can name what they need in order to speak honestly and listen well. Agreements might include giving everyone an opportunity to contribute, respecting the privacy of personal stories, and responding to disagreement with care. These practices give substance to our welcome. They help us make room for someone whose voice might otherwise be lost in the conversation.

There is theology in the way we make that room. Paul describes the church as a body whose members need one another and whose different gifts contribute to its life (1 Corinthians 12:12-26). We can approach a group conversation with that same willingness to receive. Someone's question may send us back to a passage we thought we understood. A different interpretation may ask us to explain our own reading more carefully. Through this shared attention to Scripture and one another, we remain open to God's grace forming us.

"Uniting across differences" means finding ways to worship, learn, and care for one another while making room for different experiences and convictions. Our groups give us repeated opportunities to practice this as we return to the conversation and come to know one another over time. At the community dinner, that openness takes another form as people of different beliefs share the work of preparing a meal and welcoming their neighbors.

I hope we will carry this attentiveness wherever we gather. At the Thanksgiving dinner, it may mean taking time to sit with someone we do not know well. In a study group, it may mean pausing long enough for another person to finish a thought before offering our own. Our vision asks us to make room for real people whose stories and questions may change how we understand Scripture, our neighbors, and our own calling.