

Taste and see that the Lord is good. Bitter. Sour. Perhaps downright disgusting. That seems a more appropriate description of how Jesus' words tasted to the assembly of 5000. Having just had their grumbling stomachs satisfied, having made exceptional efforts to find him, having demanded to be always given the bread of God which gives life to the world, and having received that very gift, the crowd has now begun to complain. As Brian Peterson, a New Testament professor at a seminary in South Carolina noted, "The crowd's self-assured 'knowledge'" about who Jesus is as the son of Joseph and Mary "stands in their way of seeing the truth." And now, that barrier has been abruptly disrupted by the very one they were just clamoring to locate. A barrier that is broken only when one is drawn to Jesus, drawn into faith, by the Father who sent him.

Taste and see that the Lord is good. A fair number of years ago, sure that some people, for various reasons, for instance if you were not baptized, should not receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, an ELCA congregation had practiced what is termed as closed communion. During worship one week, it was not serious reflections upon the sermon but rather visions of afternoon fun with his girlfriend that danced in the head of one certain man in his early 20's. Having been worshipping there for some time by that point, he had been accustomed to the portion of the service when non-communicants like himself were asked to leave. However, in the fog of his fantasies, he realized that the young woman he had been sharing his heart with at the time had stepped into the line that was making its way to the front. Unsure of what to do since he normally left at this point, he quickly darted after her. When she kneeled at the railing, he followed suit. She opened up her hands, and he mirrored her. She ate and drank the bread and wine, and so did he. Then, as the everyday gifts of extraordinary grace touched his lips for the

first time ever, the indescribable joy of God's very presence exploded throughout his body. Drawn into faith in a new way by the Father and tasting the sweet Bread of life sent from heaven, the Spirit disrupted his life journey, forever etching the gospel upon his heart. These days, he finds himself living life as a retired ordained minister who mentors first call pastors and invites others to proclaim with him the greatness of the Lord. And even all these years later, as this baptized disciple approaches the railing, that same penetrating joy erupts within and, like the psalmist, the praise of God is ever in his mouth.

Taste and see that the Lord is good. Convinced, from what I understand, that those who have strayed from the Roman Catholic teachings are ingesting the consecrated elements at great spiritual risk to themselves, a prescribed Eucharistic practice had been developed. Only those who followed that faith tradition could eat and drink. Within just the last one and a half to two years, the Spirit has disrupted the cloudy lens of history, and, drawn into faith by the Father, Bishop Elizabeth Eaton and Pope Francis shared the Lord's Supper and exalted God's name, together.

Taste and see that the Lord is good. Confident in the decline of the church as well as small towns, we complain. Like the multitude in the gospel reading, we too cannot see beyond what we know to be true. In a very recent article in Christian Century, Brad Roth shared this: "The town of Formoso, Kansas (population 70), faces a steep demographic slide that has lasted decades, compounded by a particularly acute economic hollowing-out that has left the tiny community with a disproportionately older and poorer population. The town is dotted with houses that have been rented to low-income families by absentee landlords, allowed to slip into disrepair, and then abandoned. It's a challenging situation with no easy solution. Daniel Waide is the young pastor of the Formoso Community Church, a congregation of about 30 people and the

only church in town. While Waide recognizes the difficulties faced by Formoso, he hasn't lost heart. 'As long as there's people here,' he says, 'there are things that we need to do.'"

In the last two years the church has experienced a slight uptake in some new people who have connected with them. However, that isn't what motivates Pr Waide. Rather, it is a vision that reaches beyond numbers; one that is rooted in our baptismal call as disciples who serve and give all that we have, all that we do and all that we are as an offering to the Lord. As Roth continues to write, "Christian hope never promises any particular earthly outcome but rather looks forward to its ultimate fulfillment in God. If we aren't anchored in something bigger than our present circumstance—hope, some sense of mission, and ultimately God—then our work becomes just one thing after another, the minor flywheel serving its little mechanical end. We need some sense that our life and labor are ordered toward something greater than ourselves, no matter where we live. This may also be the reason that tiny, declining rural communities like...Formoso should exist at all. It's the same reason any community exists, from Kansas City to Jerusalem. It's not their economic value, artistic production, or architectural splendor. Like people, communities find their reason to exist in reference to God. They exist because God has graced them into being through love. And that is enough."

Disrupting our tunnel vision, the Father draws you and me further into the profound and holy mystery of faith as today we taste, and see, and hear the very Bread of life. May we leave this place with the praise of God ever in our mouths. And may these words of invitation from composer Sylvia Dunstan always flow from us to others: "All who hunger gather gladly, holy manna is our bread. Come from wilderness and wandering. Here in truth, we will be fed. You that yearn for days of fullness, all around us is our food. Taste and see the grace eternal. Taste and see that God is good." Amen.