

Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee
July 26, 2009

Sharing the Feast
John 6:11

Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran minister in New York City who recently made a stunning discovery about her family history. She had always known that her father had immigrated to America in 1938. He had often talked about the church in the German town of Lubeck where he was baptized, raised, and confirmed. As an adult she had made a trip with him to see that church. But it was after her father's death that she learned the rest of the story. She found the manifest for the ship on which he had sailed to America in 1938. It was with a sense of shock and disorientation that she read next to his name the listing of his race; Hebrew. When she researched her German ancestry she found rabbis, not pastors.

Her research revealed that her grandparents had decided to become Christians and to raise their son in the church. But their adoption of the Christian faith did not erase their Jewish identity in the eyes of the Nazis. So they convinced their son to go to America before their situation became precarious. Then in January of 1943 her grandparents were transported to Terezin concentration camp and there her grandfather died after a short time. Two years later her grandmother volunteered to take the place of a woman who was being separated from her children to be shipped to Auschwitz. She was ready to die. Unbeknownst to her the Nazis had been paid 1.5 million dollars to divert the train she boarded to Switzerland, where the prisoners were met by the Red Cross.

Years later Heidi Neumark traveled to Switzerland as a child to see her grandmother. Her grandmother gave her the gift of roses with all the thorns removed. She describes what she has learned about her family in these words:

Faith mattered deeply to my Jewish forebears, and to my father. I find myself held in the continuity of their love of God and caught in their heartbreaking divide. I believe that God is caught there too. I can only assume that my grandparents' hope for life in the waters of baptism was different from my own. One thing seems clear—they turned toward the church for the sake of their children and their children's children. For me. Was it the right choice? It's not for me to judge. Their judgment sent my father to these shores and gave me life. It pains me to think that my faith may have cost my grandparents theirs, that my faith is bound to their trauma and terror, though I cannot know what faith, if any, lit up the secret corners of their souls when evil came crashing down around them (*Christian Century*, July 14, 2009, page 37).

In the sixth chapter of John's gospel we find Jesus drawing on his Jewish heritage to bring into being a family of faith. A great crowd has followed Jesus into the hills of Galilee. Jesus surveys the crowd and asks Philip, "How are we to buy bread that these people may eat?" Philip assumes that Jesus is asking about the logistics of securing, preparing, and delivering food for a very large crowd. This will be a huge catering job. He immediately begins to estimate the financial cost of such an undertaking. The cost clearly exceeds the financial resources available to Jesus and the disciples.

But Philip does not recognize that Jesus' question is moving in another direction. Jesus better than anyone else understands why this crowd of people has followed him into the hills. Not many of them have come looking for a free lunch. Most are there looking for a faith that can light up their souls when life comes crashing down around them. They are looking for something to believe in. They are hoping that Jesus can show them what God is doing in the world.

John places this story in the context of the Passover Feast. By so doing he emphasizes the Jewish heritage of Jesus and the disciples. Like Moses Jesus is providing manna in the wilderness. Like Moses Jesus will show mastery over the sea when he rescues his disciples from the storm on the Sea of Galilee. John finds in these events a new Exodus. Jesus is taking the people on a journey which connects them to God in a new and powerful way. The significance of Jesus' ministry is revealed when he takes the loaves, gives thanks, and distributes them to the people. The eyes of the people are opened to see Jesus in a new way. In this feast Jesus links his followers to God and to one another in a more profound way than they could possibly imagine. The sharing of this feast brings into being a new family of faith. The one who feeds the people in the wilderness will be with them wherever they go.

On July 20, 1969, Buzz Aldrin was one of the two Americans who spent three hours on the moon. The fortieth anniversary of that event has been commemorated this past week. An important part of that mission was not publicized at the time. Aldrin was an elder at the Webster Presbyterian Church in Webster, Texas. He and John Glenn were two of the five astronauts who were active members of the Webster Church during their years in that program. During Aldrin's time on the moon his congregation in Texas gathered for worship and celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Aldrin participated in that service from the moon, using the elements and the chalice given to him by the congregation before he began his journey into space. Sharing that feast was an act of thanksgiving for the grace he found in the family of faith that God had given to him. Even on the moon he was spiritually connected to that family. Every year the Webster Presbyterian Church remembers that event by celebrating Lunar Communion Sunday on the Sunday closest to July 20.

The decision of Buzz Aldrin and his Presbyterian Church to avoid publicity forty years ago is consistent with what we read of Jesus in John 6. The gospel writer tells us that some of those who shared the feast with Jesus in the hills of Galilee wanted to make Jesus a celebrity of the first order. Some called him a prophet. Others wanted to crown him king. Here was the messiah they had been waiting for. Now was the time to project him onto the world stage. It was then that Jesus disappeared from their midst. He would not be the celebrity messiah they want and expect. His mission was much more profound than that.

The family of faith Jesus created is not limited to the world we know. This family transcends every boundary and is rooted in eternity. The feast we share is one that will never end.