

A Story of Sacramental Mystery

The Second Bread



James A. Campbell

The worst of times. People were eating their dogs. Children were fainting in school. Fuel for heating gone. Makeshift stoves consumed wood torn from buildings. The Chukotka Region of the Russian Far East was desperation turning to crisis. The local Russian government was keeping it under wraps. “No problem” was the official word.

Screams for assistance, however, had not gone unheard. Russian native people were communicating with relations in Alaska. The word was getting out. The mobilization of church resources of food, medicine, and clothing to this isolated region of Russia proved a challenge to imagination and determination.

Still, our effort was not our project. We were helping our Russian neighbors to help themselves. We needed Russian leadership. That was when I first met “Lena.” Lena was willing to work with us but had her concerns. Who were United Methodists? Were we one of those churches that demanded conversion? Did we require compliance to a faith statement? Would we stand by them in the long run? Americans were making many unkept promises. Most of all she questioned, “Can you accept me for who I am if my spiritual journey is not yours?” I replied, “Can you accept us for who we are even as we extend our love with no strings attached?”

Lena was gutsy. She dared to open a soup kitchen under the nose of the Russian governor. “Be careful Lena!” I kept saying. “People are starving,” she would reply.

Our next meeting was exhausting. Dead tired, I rubbed my face to then look up at her across the table. “Why are you doing this?” she asked. “What are you getting out of this?”

“We believe those you serve are the face of God.” Lena smiled. Later, she needed to shop before heading back to Russia. At the height of the tourist season, the traffic was congested. It was in the midst of negotiating one of the busiest intersections that Lena said to me, “Tell me about your God.”

I can’t remember my reply, only the undercurrent of wonder of the sacred presence of God that was carrying us along. In my entire ministry I had never experienced God create with such intensity.

A year later Lena was back to speak to the area churches. As we entered one church it hit me, this was Communion Sunday. Quickly through the translator I told Lena this was a special day. Please do not feel you are obligated to join in. We respect you Lena in however you experience the sacred in your life. We are simply thankful you are here.



There is the classical Holy Communion, created bread, the bread of remembering. There is also the street bread, the manna, the jazz bread of God improvising in the moment, bread of grace not made but discovered in a million different forms. In truth, each bread is fulfilled in the other.

Lena said to me “So tell me about this Holy Communion.”

How does one explain Holy Communion in a minute with the pressure of a service already started? I’m not sure what I said. Worship evolved into sacrament. The pastor asked me to serve. I held the cup.

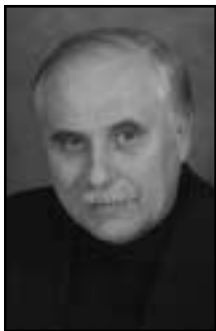
Lena stood up and came forward. How could she have any sense of what she was doing? The translator told her to receive the bread and to dip it into the cup. Every rule that some believe insures the purity and respect of the sacrament was broken.

That’s when it happened. Dipping the bread and eating it, Lena suddenly clasped her hands around mine as I held the chalice. Who, I wondered, was holding the cup or was it perhaps our hands together that had become the cup? In like measure I wondered about the bread. Was there one sacramental bread or two?

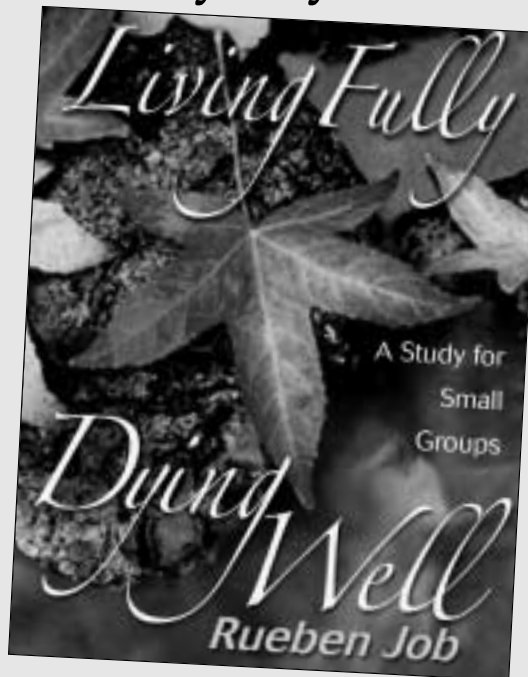
There is the classical Holy Communion, created bread, the bread of remembering. There is also the street bread, the manna, the jazz bread of God improvising in the moment, bread of grace not made but discovered in a million different forms. In truth, each bread is fulfilled in the other. Sometimes we experience such mystery in Communion that bread of the Table transcends into manna. More often, bread broken at Communion sends us searching for the bread of heaven in the face of Christ found in the least expected moments and corners of our living.

That was the day, a cold gray Alaskan Sunday, when the bread of God came unto itself: manna arising from forty years of cold war came forward to the Table, and breaking all the rules, embraced the cup of God’s love until it became the human hands that held it. In the distance, waiting, waiting for our hands, all of our hands that had become the cup, were voices of our brothers and sisters waiting and praying, “Give us this day our daily bread.” □

James A. Campbell is pastor of Turnagain United Methodist Church in Anchorage, Alaska. He was for a number of years director of Humanitarian Aid to the Russian Far East for the United Methodist and Moravian Churches.



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