

A toast to a Sweet victory...like none other  
Ezekiel 37

This morning we are gathered around the most unique table found on the planet. We call it “The Lord’s Table”, “The Communion Table”, “The last Supper”, “The Eucharist”... it is also a victory table and we are going to feast on it pretty soon. It is unique not because it is made of pine but, for what it represents and what it does. . What it represents is “the incomparably great power for us who believe” the power to move from death to life. What it does is unite us into one body of Christ.

Last week Mark shared from Ezekiel 37 about Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones. In verses 1-6 we read an amazing vision:

*God grabbed me. God’s Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. He led me around and among them—a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain—dry bones, bleached by the sun.*

*He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”*

*I said, “Master God, only you know that.”*

*He said to me, “Prophecy over these bones: ‘Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!’”*

*God, the Master, told the dry bones, “**Watch this: I’m bringing the breath of life to you and you’ll come to life.** I’ll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. **You’ll come alive and you’ll realize that I am God!**”*

Christianity Today printed the following story...God has a way of turning the deepest pain into victory.

Tulu was the fifth eldest child of eight, but suffered from an unidentified disease that made him physically weak and a slow learner. During July 2001, Tulu accepted Christ and experienced God's healing hand. Tulu's health improved to such an extent that he was able to attend secondary school in a predominantly Muslim area in southern Ethiopia.

Tulu devoted time to prayer and studying the Word of God. He became known for his warmth and affection when witnessing about God's love to the community. However, some Muslim extremists did not appreciate the change in Tulu's life and attacked him five months after his conversion. Even though a spear penetrated his skull, after intensive treatment he miraculously recovered.

"During this time," recalls his mother, Lulit, "there were only four believers in our area, but through Tulu's persecution, God saved 50 people, including his father and me."

IN 2005 Mohammed confronted Tulu at school...he swung his machete and hit Tulu's throat with a single blow as he shouted the Jihad (Islamic) war cry...The family tried to rush him to a nearby clinic, but the young evangelist took his final breath and died en route. He was 19.

Then, on March 9, 2005, local police imprisoned nine of Tulu's family members for allegedly demolishing property belonging to another tribe. ... They were imprisoned in the same facility as Mohammed.

Some local church leaders were given permission to visit prisoners weekly. During a visit, the church leaders approached Mohammed with a few words of encouragement. Though at first he was not receptive, the leaders continued to demonstrate God's unconditional love...As the leaders continued to invite him to follow Christ, he started to show interest. Because of their patience in sharing the gospel and their reassurance that as Christians and pastors of Tulu's family they held no grudge against him, God's grace broke through and Mohammed accepted Christ as his Lord.

Although local authorities attributed the cause of Tulu's murder to a disagreement between the two families, Mohammed confessed that religious fanaticism, fanned by Muslim extremists, was the real reason for Tulu's murder. He sincerely regretted what happened.

The two church leaders disciplined Mohammed and three other Muslim-background believers while in prison. On March 5, a little more than two years after he had killed Tulu, Mohammed was baptized in the name of the God he once persecuted. The prison authorities escorted him and the other three prisoners to the church compound and witnessed their baptism.

When the excited converts were asked to give their testimonies before being immersed, Mohammed made sure all the witnesses understood that he was being baptized in the name of the Almighty God, testifying of his redemption in Jesus Christ. After the converts came out of the water, they prayed, sang hymns, and celebrated Communion. (Today's Christian, © 2007 Christianity Today International.)

We all once lay in that valley of dry bones... Lifeless, Voiceless and Sightless collections, Useless, Forgotten, Unconnected, Incapable of moving from that place. The place where we did not know God...that's the valley of dry bones. Some are still there. Some still do not know God...some have never seen this table as anything but pine, glue and paint with bread and juice on it.

What is evident in looking over the valley is that the bones can not help themselves...Ezekiel was shown the valley and could not help the lifelessness before him...no, there is nothing anyone can do for the bones or for the lifelessness...none except for the one who gives all life the one who has given us life in his Son. Papa can give life and we are standing here this morning as proof.

And that is exactly what this morning is all about. For while our souls once lay helpless and lifeless our Papa spoke life and breathed life and gave life and has raised us from the dead. Ezekiel says it is of HIS own life that he gives. Maybe this is a telling of how Jesus would one day die on the cross, willingly giving his own life for us and to us...maybe it isn't, but here we are this morning, a people who were once lifeless and helpless to do anything about it - sitting before the table of life and of victory over death - to give thanks and remember the gift we have received in Jesus – and to be sure it is neither the table nor anything on it that gives life – but is a witness to the one who has...Papa.

Instead of a valley of dry bones we are now alive...hear this (Ephessians 2:1-7) *It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah. Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus.*

Ours is a complete victory – like no other victory ever won – And this table says it all for us...it tells us of his incomparable power to give life to those who believe.

In his sermon "The Sinner's Feast," Lee Eclow describes what should be the celebrative side of Communion in the context of worship:

This table is different. This table of the Lord isn't where sinners find Christ but where sinners celebrate being found ...

Maybe some morning, instead of solemnly taking the bread and juice, we should dance for joy. Maybe we should sing every born-again song we know. Maybe we should ask if anyone wants seconds and hold our little cups high to toast lost sisters found and dead brothers alive.

Maybe we should tell our "dry bones to life" stories and laugh like people who no longer fear death. Now, to those who are still in the valley the church would seem no different than the vast plain of dry bones. Yet, despite struggle even unto death...we breathe now with God's breath and live with God's life...it is in our stories of rising up from the valley that we come alive and realize who is our Papa.

For centuries, we have drunk the wine of the Lord's Supper, reminding us of the bittersweet truth that Christ's blood was shed for humanity. Jesus has been waiting all these centuries to drink it anew with us at the wedding supper of the Lamb. When he does, there will be no thought of death.

Konstantin Makovskii, a prominent Russian painter of the 19th century, once painted an enormous picture, depicting a wedding feast. The bride is standing, and the guests are holding out their cups toward her. The explanation with the painting says they are shouting, "*Gor'ko! Gor'ko!*" meaning, "Bitter! Bitter!" The shouts are in reference to the wine, which had turned bitter. Much like our wedding custom of tapping on glasses, Russian custom says the newlywed couple must kiss in order to make the wine sweet again.

Isaiah 25:6-8 promises, "*But here on this mountain, God-of-the-Angel-Armies will throw a feast for all the people of the world, A feast of the finest foods, a feast with vintage wines, a feast of seven courses, a feast lavish with gourmet desserts. And here on this mountain, God will banish the pall of doom hanging over all peoples, The shadow of doom darkening all nations. Yes, he'll banish death forever. And God will wipe the tears from every face. He'll remove every sign of disgrace From his people, wherever they are. Yes! God says so!*"

When we are finally together with Jesus, when the Bridegroom and his bride kiss, Isaiah's promise of a feast with the finest of wines will come to pass. The wine [life], once bitter, will be sweet indeed.

In his *Letters to a Young Evangelical*, Tony Campolo shares a story from his youth about taking Communion:

Sitting with my parents at a Communion service when I was very young, perhaps six or seven years old, I became aware of a young woman in the pew in front of us who was sobbing and shaking. The minister had just finished reading the passage of Scripture written by Paul that says, "Whosoever shall eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:27). As the Communion plate with its small pieces of bread was passed to the crying woman before me, she waved it away and then lowered her head in despair. It was then that my Sicilian father leaned over her shoulder and, in his broken English, said sternly, "Take it,

girl! It was meant for you. Do you hear me?" She raised her head and nodded—and then she took the bread and ate it. I knew that at that moment some kind of heavy burden was lifted from her heart and mind. Since then, I have always known that a church that could offer Communion to hurting people was a special gift from God.

(Tony Campolo's Letters to a Young Evangelical (Perseus Books Group, 2006))

Now we feast at the victory table and we'll offer a toast to the sweetest victory ever as heirs to the promise and the gift of life in victory over the valley of dry bones...and laugh like people who no longer fear death

If you have ever believed in Jesus as the son of God who died on the cross for your sins...You are invited to celebrate. If you have never believed today is a good day to rise up out of the valley to life in Christ.

Let's take a minute to get our hearts ready