

“Well-Fed in Every Way”
John 6:51-58
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When I was at the University of Kentucky in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, I spent a good bit of time in a little town called Georgetown which is about twenty minutes from Lexington. As I have told some of you before, my college roommate’s grandfather was a Nazarene pastor there. We went partly to hear him preach and partly to eat Mac’s grandmother’s cooking. I won’t say which part drew us more.

Granddaddy was a fine preacher in his style, which was different from mine, but he was a loving soul who was passionate about his faith and I got a great deal out of his preaching. He offered food for the soul every week and he had a keen sense of his congregation. The service never went past 12 and near the end of his sermon, he included an illustration about food because that’s what people were thinking about.

Nanny was an incredible old-fashioned southern cook. I learned from her how to make things like sausage gravy and sweet tea, but I mostly ate what she made, two or three servings at each meal, things like country fried steak and gravy, homemade mac and cheese, green beans that had been cooked all day and homemade rolls, all followed by pecan or coconut cream pie. She liked people to eat a lot of her food and I was running 70-80 miles a week at the time, so I made her happy every meal.

They were both feeders in their own way, nurturers of body and soul. Granddaddy fed us with the Word and Nanny fed us with magnificent food and so, we went back to the university each Sunday evening well-fed in every way imaginable.

I reflect on this experience today because it illustrates the way God in Christ extends love to us. “O taste and see that the Lord is good,” the Psalmist says (Psalm 34:8). “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed,” Wisdom says, according to Proverbs (Proverbs 9:5). The author of Ephesians encourages us to be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). And in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus says that he is

the bread of life, the living bread that has come down from heaven, and whoever eats of this bread will live forever (John 6:51).

There is a whole lot of eating going on in these texts, enough to make Nanny happy. This image of feeding as a symbol of God's care is a common one in scripture, but it is explored in the greatest detail in this passage from John, not just the part we have read today, but the whole chapter we have been reading over a series of weeks.

Jesus feeds the people actual food first, a large crowd of them, using and multiplying a boy's five barley loaves and two fish. Then, he delivers an extended discourse in which he says he is the bread of life who has come down from heaven to feed them in other ways, ways that will lead to eternal life. It is a provoking image, but what exactly does it mean? Jesus seems to be saying that he will make sure that we are well-fed in every way, but how will he do this?

One way is through the celebration of communion. There are eucharistic themes running through the bread of life discourse and communion is one way in which the God who was in Christ nurtures us. Unlike the synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – John does not include a story about a last supper in an upper room with the well-known words of institution. There are four such stories in the Christian Testament, but the fourth is in 1 Corinthians 11.

John has no account of that meal. In fact, John's entire chronology of Holy Week differs from the synoptics' chronology. But John does include this long discourse on the bread of life which can inform our experience of communion. We need to be careful not to take the imagery literally. The details Jesus mentions about eating his flesh and drinking his blood are metaphorical. Even Roman Catholic Scholars like Regis Duffy say the Body of Christ is at the table, not on the table.

This is important to underscore because over time some literal interpretations have been put forth and they have tended to exclude people from the sacred meal. One monastic thinker in the Middle Ages argued that the bread is Jesus' literal body and thus we should chew it carefully so as to not crush the bones of Jesus. Who would be willing to eat the bread if this were so? Indeed, no one did except the monks.

But setting aside such hyper-literal interpretations, communion can be a time when we are well-fed by the God who was in Christ. It is more than a time of remembrance. It is an experience of Christ's presence. The stories about a meal shared in an upper room help us remember what Christ did for us and that is critical. But the bread of life discourse helps us recognize Christ presence, and when we do that, we cannot help but feel strengthened, encouraged, well-fed in every way.

Hasn't this been our experience at some time? Perhaps it was at a time of loss, when we felt abandoned and questioned our faith, but then, we sensed the nearness of Christ at this table and eventually found the strength we needed to go on. Perhaps it was at a time when we needed to make an important decision, but felt torn by the options before us, uncertain which way to go, but then we sensed the nearness of Christ at this table and we found the guidance we needed, perhaps not the answer in direct form, but the ability to make a decision with clarity of mind. We do receive the bread of life in communion. God in Christ satisfies our deepest hunger, whatever it is.

But communion is not the only way Christ feeds us. When Jesus says he is the bread of life, the bread that has come down from heaven, he is speaking in much broader terms about who he is and what he can do for us. He is the source of all life. He is the very incarnation of love. Anyone who is connected to him, anyone who believes and abides in him will receive nourishment for body and soul and thus experience eternal life which in John certainly includes life after death but begins right now. Eternal life is life lived in relationship with the living God, full and abundant, shaped by love, characterized by joy.

Jesus offers us this kind of life through a personal relationship with him. He offers to feed us in every way with himself and how he does this is through just about every aspect of life. We tend to think first of churchy things and they are, of course, part of the story, an important part. The church exists to enable us to experience Christ, to extend the work of Christ, to do everything we can to see that everyone is well-fed.

Worship is one obvious means through which this happens, and not just on communion Sundays. Some people find more nourishment

in music while others find strength in preaching. Some are fed through prayers and silence while others find encouragement in the companionship of fellow believers. But the bread of life is available in worship every Sunday, Christ offers to feed us here.

Sunday school classes and other small groups can also set the table for us to be fed. Time spent in study and prayer with people we come to love and trust creates an opening for Christ to come to us and feed us in different ways. And some feel more fed in the midst of service, working in the clothing ministry, going on a mission trip, visiting a homebound member. Jesus did say that those who lose themselves for him will find themselves. Sometimes we satisfy our deepest hunger by getting past ourselves and reaching out to others. Every aspect of church life is intended to help us experience Christ and thus be well-fed.

But Christ doesn't come to us only through the church. The God who was in Christ comes to us through all of life. Thus, while our souls are hopefully fed through worship, Bible study and mission service, they may also be fed by going to a concert or play, watching a dance performance or movie, playing with our children or grandchildren or taking our dog for a walk. Our souls might be fed by simply paying attention to the majesty of creation whether this means the mountains or beaches of our home state or some other part of the country or world.

I have felt the presence of God and been moved over and over again through every aspect of church life, but I have also felt the presence of God and been moved at a U2 concert, watching a play at Burning Coal Theatre, walking our German Shepherds through the trails of Umstead State Park, watching a sunset on the Maasai Mara National Reserve in Kenya. God is present everywhere and in everything. So, why wouldn't God be able to use all of life to nourish us?

I know some church people have trouble with this idea. I have told some of you about a pointed letter I received from a family member of a congregant in another setting. He had come to visit from two states away on a Sunday when I did a dramatic sermon. This Sunday I told the story of Francis of Assisi, a dramatic sermon I have preached here. This man, a good Baptist in the worst sense of the term, was angered by the

sermon. His three complaints were that no scripture was read, Francis was a Catholic and he worshiped creation which made him an idolater.

Well, apparently the Gospel According to Matthew wasn't in this man's Bible, because it was read from extensively, from a large pulpit Bible. Yes, Francis was Catholic, but there were no Baptists when Francis lived, and is being Catholic really that bad? And no, Francis did not worship creation, he marveled at creation and thus was moved to worship God through that experience. There is a difference, but some people cannot see it. It is so ingrained in them through years of teaching that the only way God can speak is in the church and through the Bible that they cannot hear God's voice all around them, they cannot be fed by much of the food God has put on the table.

I once heard a prominent African-American preacher address in his sermon on television a complaint he had received. So, whoever was responsible for the complaint must have felt chastised even though no name was mentioned. The complaint was that some sister had said she wasn't coming anymore because she just wasn't being fed. "Not being fed?" the preacher said, "There are many people coming and they are not going home hungry. There is obviously plenty of food on the table. If you're not getting anything to eat, maybe that's on you!"

I can't imagine giving that direct a response to criticism in a public forum, but the preacher had a point. Whether we are being fed or not, especially in a spiritual way, is a complex matter that involves us and any source of nourishment. But perhaps the most critical insight here is not whether we think this church or that preacher feeds us, but whether we might be missing other food on the table of life, like what is available outside the walls of the church in the created world and in the life of this community. Of course, God speaks to us here, feeds us, nurtures us, but do we really think God's activity is limited to any sphere of life?

God is everywhere and in everything and this not only means that God can feed us through any aspect of life, it means there is also a sense in which many actual meals can take on a communal character. I am not equating these meals with communion, but there are other meals where we sense of the nearness of Christ and feel well-fed spiritually.

For example, quite often meals that are shared at times of loss, before or after funerals, can take on this character. It's partly the fact that we are together with family members we may not have seen in years; and it's partly the stories we share, the memories we have; but somehow as we are sharing good food and memories, we have this sense that we are not alone, that we are accompanied by Grace and as a result, we feel well-fed in every way.

I also think of meals like one some of us shared with clothing ministry participants this week as A Place at the Table did a pop-up meal here. It is a pay as you are able restaurant on West Hargett Street that meets a need, provides healthy food and builds community. The director will present a Wednesday night program here this fall. This meal was a simple sandwich and chips, but it was offered in love with a token for a meal at the restaurant and a friendly conversation. Somehow a simple meal became more than a simple meal.

In his book *Jesus Was a Liberal* Stanford University Dean of Religious Life Scotty McLennan tells a story about a church he was part of in Boston. It was located on Meetinghouse Hill, but was known as Eating House Hill because the minister, the Rev. Jim Allen, always had a huge pot of stew, chili or soup cooking with lots of fresh bread.

People came by needing help with rent or utilities, to discuss a problem, because their children had been taken away or they were illegal aliens. The pastor would always help as he was able financially, call agencies that could offer assistance and listen to each person's concern, all the while feeding them soup and bread.

Most of these people, McLennan says, never came to church, but they shared communion right there with the Reverend. Not only did they fill their stomachs and get concrete help with their problems, they filled their souls.

That's what it means to be well-fed in every way and that's what Jesus offers when he says he is the bread who has come down from heaven to give us eternal life. "Eat up!" he says to one and all, "There is plenty to go around." If we are hungry, what are we waiting for?