

Soul Food  
John 6:35, 41-51

Once I was in a church that served meals each Wednesday evening. The congregation also scheduled numerous picnics and covered dish dinners through the year. As the prayer meeting group gathered one night, one of the members said sarcastically, "It seems that we never come to church unless we eat." At this point in my ministry I have been around long enough to keep my mouth shut when I hear comments like that. I look the other way or pretend that I don't hear. But at that time I thought I should always have an answer for everything, so I replied, "Maybe you haven't noticed that Jesus was the 'eatingest' religious teacher in history!"

When you read the gospels, you can't miss the prominent place of food and eating in the life and teachings of Jesus. One of the criticisms of Jesus was that he ate with prostitutes and tax-collectors. Some highly legalistic observers called him a "glutton and a drunkard." Jesus enjoyed weddings and seemed never to turn down a dinner invitation. In some of his parables he talked about dining etiquette. He once, according to the stories, fed five thousand persons on the hillside and, on another occasion, four thousand. He instructed his followers to pray for "daily bread."

Jesus also used food as a symbol of spiritual need and quest. He told a story about a young man who came home from the "far country" because he was hungry. But, Jesus suggested, that was enough! He taught that we should seek bread that satisfies more than a temporary hunger. He spoke of the life to come in terms of a banquet table where fellowship, abundance of food, and joyous conversation abound. And when Jesus wanted to give an assurance of his enduring presence, he broke a loaf of bread and said, "This is my body. Whenever you eat this, think of me."

So we should pay attention to the line that provides the theme for today's lesson. Jesus, responding to the crowd that came seeking free food, said, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Let's not just shrug and say that this is just another of the "I am" statements or that it is simply another symbol that Jesus employed. What does it mean to say that Jesus is the "bread of life"?

Well, clearly this is a symbol or a metaphor. Jesus was referring not to actual food but to something that nourishes the spirit. The confusion and grumbling of the people who heard him show that he was trying to lead them to another level. Jesus even became a little impatient with them. "Stop complaining among yourselves," he scolded. "Listen and think!"

The idea that Jesus supplies food for the spirit implies that there is within us a spiritual hunger. We almost try not to think of that. We have immediate problems to consider and to worry about. We have distractions and obligations that keep us from asking deep questions and giving thought to the profound in life. You have to jolt yourself or have some event or situation jolt you out of the material and the concerns of the moment. Even though we know that we have emotional and spiritual needs we don't usually go there intentionally. We carry the burdens and sag under the load. The concept of spiritual hunger is far down our list of concerns.

Eckhart Tolle recounts a Zen story of two Buddhist monks, Tanzan and Ekido, who were walking along a country road that had become extremely muddy after heavy rains. Near a village they came upon a young woman who was trying to cross the road. The mud was deep and she could not find a place to cross without ruining the silk kimono she was wearing. Monks were not to have anything to do with women. Without hesitation Tanzan picked up the young woman and carried her to the other side. Ekido was horrified that Tanzan would violate the rule of the order, but he said nothing.

The monks walked on in silence. Five hours later, as they neared the lodging temple, Ekido could restrain himself no longer. “Why did you carry that girl across the road?” he asked. “We monks are not supposed to do things like that.” Tanzan turned to his friend and said calmly, “I put that girl down hours ago. Are you still carrying her?” (*A New Earth*, p. 139.)

Spiritual hunger takes many forms—guilt, resentment, alienation, fear, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. We carry them and stew about them and allow them to distort our view of ourselves, of others, of the world, and of God. The pain we carry is a need for spiritual nurture. Jesus took that for granted and appealed to his hearers in every way possible to give attention to their needs.

If we come to consider that Jesus does address these needs, these hungers, of ours, what does it mean to say that he is the “bread of life?” What specifically do we mean when we say that Jesus is sufficient for our hunger, that we might actually not go hungry again?

I like to try to give some concrete expression to images such as this. I can do so only from my own perspective. Here’s what it means to me to say that Jesus is the “bread of life.” For one thing, when I turn to Jesus for my spiritual nourishment, I find that he inspires me with an example or a model of what life can become. I subscribe to a magazine called *Spirituality and Health*. The first thing I read in each issue is a question-and-answer column done by Rabbi Rami Shapiro. In the most recent issue, someone asked pointedly, “Is Jesus God or not?” How do you think a Jewish rabbi would answer that? Here’s what Shapiro said: “Is Jesus God? Yes. And so are we. The difference between Jesus and us is that he realized his true identity and lived out the obligations that come with that realization—loving God/reality, loving our neighbor, caring for the least among us, and challenging injustice—and we haven’t. I think Jesus was a

Jewish mystic, prophet, poet, and storyteller who used language metaphorically to awaken us to our true nature and how to live from it.”

When I am wise enough to recognize my spiritual need and turn to Jesus, I see the possibilities of human life and I am encouraged. Also, I find direction. There is much in my life that needs work—thoughts that need to be redirected, attitudes that need to be changed, prejudices that need to be eliminated, and energies that need to be focused. When I read the words of Jesus and consider the actions of Jesus, I see the goals that I need to set for myself.

Jesus, for example, was above prejudice. His openness and acceptance kept him in hot water. He did not accept the notion that women were second-class citizens. He treated them as equals. (Some of his followers still haven't gotten that message.) He did not accept the idea that Jews and non-Jews were different. Jesus treated Gentiles the same as he treated Jews. For him the religious and the non-religious were no different. I suspect that, had the issue come to his attention, Jesus would have treated gays and lesbians with the same respect that he extended toward all other persons. Jesus was not tribal in his attitudes. He never felt that he belonged to a single group or village or country. He spoke of a universal family with persons coming to the table from the north and the south and the east and the west.

I need this kind of ongoing transformation in my life. I almost never open the gospels without being aware of some kind of change I need to make. That is healthy food for the soul! But the spirit requires more than information. The food that Jesus gives involves his presence. When he broke the bread and gave it to his followers, he said, *“As often as you eat this bread, remember me.”* We recognize that the spirit of Jesus the Christ abides with our spirits.

*"I am the bread of life"* implies a hunger on our part and a source of nourishment on the part of Jesus. A third suggestion I find here has to do with the "dailyness" of eating. You and I can have a wonderful, satisfying dinner almost every evening. Our lives are so well blessed that we never worry about having enough. We might be filled in the evening, but we are ready for breakfast right on time next morning. We have developed the habit of eating at certain times, and we automatically come to the table.

Doesn't it make sense that spiritual needs are like that? You don't load up just every once in a while and remain healthy. Spiritual nourishment is a daily matter. You don't appreciate the presence of Christ unless you become aware of it. Christ is there, but we go through our days and we agonize over our problems without reference to him. That's why he kept telling people to wake up to the reality of God in life. Feeding the soul in an ongoing matter just like feeding the body.

Cathy and I were able to take a seven-day cruise in July. If you have ever taken a cruise; you know that, for all the talk about locations and relaxation, the thing most prominent on a cruise ship is the food. Food is everywhere. It is served all the time. And with few exceptions, all the food is included in the price of the trip. It takes a few days to adjust to the opportunity to eat just about anything you want at any time of the day. I heard a story once about a man who scrimped and saved for years to take a cruise. He did not know that all the meals were covered in the basic costs. He loaded his suitcase with crackers and packaged goods he could bring from home. On the ship he quietly ate in his cabin and envied the people who came and went from the dining rooms. Near the end of the cruise he learned that he could have eaten like a king the whole time, and he had missed the opportunity.

Now, I suppose that story was made up by some preacher to illustrate a point in the same way that I am using it. But it does make a point. You and I have food for the soul laid out for us, and we don't take it. There is bread for the journey and nourishment for the spirit. And we certainly have the hunger! When Jesus said, "*I am the bread of life,*" he was talking about something essential to our very being.

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