

## ***Sustenance and the Soul***

**John 6:24-35**

*A long time ago before time began, Jesus Christ was hanging out in heaven unemployed, wondering what he could do for a career—one where he really could make a difference. His parents—the divine Creator and Spirit—were virtually nowhere to be seen, busy conceiving and designing the universe and all that was in it, and if he just followed their lead doing his own miraculous stunts and other marvels, he might never get out from underneath their shadow. The worlds he might visit would simply view him as yet another divine supernatural being, leaving him with the sense he couldn't stand on his own two feet.*

*So, Jesus studied and pondered his career choices until one morning, he awoke with a revelation! He could start a new religion on Earth—new because he would wait until human civilization got its start and then, at just the right time, he'd come in and save the world! It was an inspired idea! Unlike other faith traditions which might exist by that time, he would make his religion universally appealing, inclusive of everyone wherever they may be on Earth. This was going to take some effort, as he could see from the blueprints, Mom and Dad were showing off their wild imaginations, dotting the landscape with people in varying places and circumstances—different races, colors, ages, languages, customs, interests, experiences—you name it. These humans had very little in common. Clearly, with so many varying perspectives and views on Earth, human beings were going to find it virtually impossible to*

*agree on anything if there wasn't some universally recognized and appealing hook.*

*Jesus wondered what that might be. "Would they all follow my new religion if it was based on a perfect book—a real bestseller—one that no one could question or misinterpret?"*

*The problem with that, he realized, was Dad was giving these humans a rational brain and the ability to think on their own, so everyone would have their own opinions on what it means. Lord knows, what kind of disagreements they'll get into then! A book, even if it were true in every jot and tittle, wouldn't be accepted as such, since it was always going to be interpreted through biased and limited minds and applied to unrelated circumstances. Even God couldn't be expected to come up with a manual that has clear instructions to follow in each and every situation.*

*"Gee, this is harder than I thought" Jesus mused. "Well, what if my new religion was based solely on good works—kind and merciful deeds—where people would not only be charitable in service to others, but in turn they would benefit from feelings of goodwill?"*

*That had to be agreeable to everyone on Earth; who doesn't like to feel good? Yet, after he considered it a bit more, Jesus foresaw some obvious problems; with people exercising their God-given freedom, instead of doing good to others, they could very well be egocentric, selfish, hedonistic, and self-serving. With humans, there are no guarantees.*

*Jesus sputtered, "What is it with these humans? Even being nice to each other isn't something the world over doesn't have in common?"*

*So, Jesus was stymied; what could he do? Taking into account the likelihood of human unruliness, he came up with another way to make everyone follow his new religion.*

*“What if I make it about ruling the world? I could build great temples and cathedrals, where people would learn to see me as I AM so they would naturally worship me! I could inspire doctrines that would equate my name with the greatest authority in heaven and on earth; I could align my religion with rulers and governments everywhere and institute a divine right and imprimatur to control entire populations, creating dominant cultures, crusading armies, and millions of ministers and missionaries, who would do their part to conquer or convert those who had not yet accepted my authority over them. Yes, it’s not ideal, but scaring people with a little fire and brimstone or an occasional inquisition and sword might do the trick. It may not meet heaven’s standards, but it should work well on Earth. They might even take Mom and Dad seriously and, eventually, the entire world would look to me to save them from divine judgment and eternal damnation!”*

*Jesus thought long and hard about this option. If he were human, ruling the world would seem quite appealing. But being divine, he couldn’t get past the endless complications inherent to governing the world, not to mention the moral conflicts he’d have with his own parents’ vision for creation.*

*So, after talking it over with his mother, Jesus realized there was a much easier way to help get his new religion off the ground that would have global appeal. He could base it on sharing a meal. Everyone had to eat and drink! Without food, no one could survive*

*for very long. A meal was just perfect—eating was a daily activity (if not many times each day), no matter where people were on the face of the earth. Meals bring people together, and when they are together, they will chat and share their lives and interests and create and build relationships. They would practice sacrifice and selflessness almost by nature, generously offering family-style meals and divvying up what was provided. It was a stroke of genius! Of course, this was it. Mealtimes were the perfect way to start a new religion! What a divine idea!*

*So, that's what Jesus did. No miracles were needed; he could teach people the meaning of life and love by sharing daily in the one thing no one would want to miss, i.e., a place where they could find sustenance for their body and soul. Thus, Jesus Christ came to Earth and started his new religion based on a common, ordinary, daily meal. Wherever he went, eating certainly appealed to everyone.*

I recognize I've taken a few liberties with what you may have learned in Sunday School. But, I assure you, my point is essentially true. Christianity, if you examine its initial customs and ponder its message and essence, is predicated on and practiced best in the sharing of a daily meal. Evidence for this is in how many stories and parables in the Gospels had the setting of a mealtime—that was when people got together and shared their lives and resources. In fact, the only story that is found in all four gospels (aside from those related to Jesus' death and resurrection) is the Feeding of the Multitude<sup>1</sup>—a remarkable story that illustrates what must have occurred repeatedly for good reason. People needed to eat and for

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-14

Jesus, it was a teachable moment. The sharing of the common meal contained the essence of Jesus' teachings about right relationships, community, and social justice. The gospel of Jesus Christ is profoundly reflected by what happens with the daily meal.

Most people, when hearing this, likely assume the meal at the center of the Christian message must be the Eucharist—the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, or Communion. That makes sense, given its central place in worship, symbolizing the body and blood of Christ. However, the initial experience and meaning in Jesus' community would not have been this. Yes, our monthly communion time is nice and meaningful, but it doesn't convey very well what Jesus intended with the sharing of a daily meal.

The common meal would have been a prophetic act of providence (much like manna from heaven), where no one was left hungry—a valuable expression of divine care in a world where the poor often had little to eat. It was the binding of individual, isolated lives together to form a loving and caring community, where everyone shared what they could in communal, family-style and everyone benefitted. A better comparison than the Eucharist would be a potluck supper or picnic, because it is in the act of sharing a common meal and the company you keep around a table that put into practice some of the essential features of Jesus' theology and message, i.e., in the realm of God no one is left hungry or in want, and the loving Spirit of God is present when two or more are gathered in Jesus' name. We remember Jesus for more than his body and his blood. Every time we share such a meal, the act itself is how we remember Jesus and his gospel. What makes this sacred is not the liturgy or the ceremony we associate with communion, but the deliberate care for one another as people and for each other's needs at the elemental level—the need for daily nourishment—a

fundamental human need, as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs<sup>2</sup> quantifies. The daily bread of our lives helps to sustain us physically and spiritually, individually and collectively. When we live into the spirit of loving and caring relationships, we live into the most basic principles of Christianity. As Luke described the earliest Christian communities:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread from house to house and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.  
(Acts 2:44-46)

Mealtime was Gospel time!

Parker Palmer, in a reflection on the Feeding of the Multitude (a passage that precedes and is alluded to in our text for today) writes that what this teachable moment demonstrated is not Jesus' miraculous powers to generate food, but rather his leadership and example in helping to transform people's consciences—away from a sense of scarcity toward an awareness of abundance—from a common concern over a scarcity of resources to a spirit of hospitality and generosity that reveals abundance through sharing. The abundance is what created a sense of satisfaction—abundance that came about as a result of divinely-inspired human generosity. As Palmer explains:

...[Community] is the context in which abundance can replace scarcity. Even more important, the very experience of community is itself an experience of abundance. In the faceless crowd we experience scarcity—a scarcity of contact, of concern, of affirmation, of love. But as the crowd is replaced by community, an invisible sense of abundance arises long before the community produces any visible goods or services. True abundance resides in the simple experience of people being present to one another and for one another...

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<sup>2</sup> Abraham Maslow proposed that human motivation was characteristically based on a hierarchy of needs, beginning with 1. Physiological needs (food, water, warmth, rest); 2. Safety needs (security and safety); 3. Belongingness and love needs (intimate relationships, friends); 4. Esteem needs (prestige and feelings of accomplishment), and 5. Self-actualization (achieving one's full potential, including creative activities). Needs higher on the hierarchy would not be a motivation until those that were more basic were met.

What may have happened...is that Jesus and the disciples simply modeled the act of sharing for the crowd by giving thanks for what little they had and then offering it to any who wanted to eat. As this happened, perhaps the people gathered in the small groups realized that they, too, had food they could share with one another. Perhaps they found themselves moved to emulate the generosity of Jesus and the disciples rather than hoard their scarce resources...

The story does not claim that everyone walked away from the dinner with a full belly. It simply says, "And they all ate and were satisfied" ...The culture of scarcity thrives on dissatisfaction, and breeds it as well. Our refusal to believe that we have enough is one cause of the competition that has resulted in such an inequitable distribution of resources at home and around the world. But a culture of abundance both arises from and creates a sense of satisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

In many ways, this points to what the gospel is largely about, i.e., creating a beloved community out of an anonymous crowd in a moment reflecting everyone's needs—where an atmosphere of compassion, generosity, hospitality, and caring are intentionally cultivated between humans and right and just relationships develop. Putting this into practice has implications for society on so many levels, particularly for social and economic justice, but also for simply fostering empathy, decency, caring, consideration, and ongoing friendship between people, particularly when we can turn strangers (even enemies) into friends. The hospitality expressed at mealtimes has that potential for any of us, perhaps more than any other normal activity.

Jesus clearly made this point, time and time again. The common daily meal was where both the body and soul were nourished. The fragmented nature of human relationships, the isolation that occurs between social classes and separated races and tribes, is what results in the callousness, inhumanity, aggressive competition, and greed which we deplore in any society.

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<sup>3</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity, and Caring*, Harper & Row, 1990, pp. 130, 131, 132.

As Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, explored in his monumental work, *I and Thou*, when we engage other human beings impersonally, when they are not viewed empathetically and considerately as a neighbor (i.e., someone with whom we can relate), they then become little more than objects to us—an “It” we can dismiss and ignore or cruelly utilize and manipulate for our own selfish ends. This is one of our most fundamental problems in human relations: the objectification of others. It occurs on so many levels and can only be countered in ways and in settings that re-humanize us with a spirit of empathy, hospitality, and generosity. Bonds of friendship create a sense of mutuality—of watching out for one another that is not typically present when people are separate and isolated, and relationships are distant and impersonal. In the daily setting of mutually caring relationships, that is where we regularly put into practice the highest level of human interaction and empathy which, of course, is love.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It doesn't insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it doesn't rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. (I Corinthians 13:4-6)

For many, love is best fostered and expressed around a dinner table. Love is sustenance for the soul.

Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he said,

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life...for the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

It may be why he referred to himself as the Bread of Life, for he was teaching us how to love one another—that essential need.

Since love is the most significant and meaningful experience we can have as human beings, it can also be viewed as Bread of Life—the very thing that nourishes and sustains our souls as human beings. A daily dose of love

in its varied expressions of comfort and care, laughter and lightness of heart, tenderness and attentiveness—this is what sustains us spiritually throughout life. That’s when we are at our best as humans, because we are free and secure to be who we are in the love and friendship of another. Bonds of love are formed out of a shared common life with others. What were these common meals called in the primitive church? Agape feasts—agape being the Greek word for selfless love. That’s what Jesus embodied and taught as the essence of gospel relationships—of the beloved community of those who were in right relationships. For all intents and purposes, that is the real message Jesus was bringing to his and to our world.

When we break bread and share a picnic meal in a short while, we will be expressing an inherently Christ-like ritual, i.e., the sharing of resources, the generosity of caring lives, and the abundance of goodwill that satisfies us all as friends gathered together—a place where everyone who is hungry will be fed, what is provided will be enough, and what we share will be renewing and sustaining—the company of friends who reflect the mutual love and aspirations of the one we follow, Jesus Christ. And that is most satisfying of all.

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