

“The Bread of Life, Part 2: Beyond the Ordinary to the Extraordinary”

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Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labour and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander; together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

John 6:35, 41-51

Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, ‘I am the bread that came down from heaven.’ They were saying, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, “I have come down from heaven?”’ Jesus answered them, ‘Do not complain among yourselves. No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. It is written in the prophets, “And they shall all be taught by God.” Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’

Will you pray with me? Holy God, you offer us word as nourishment and we hear today of nourishment, of being fed. May together we wrestle upon your word for us, your wisdom for us, and your hopes for us. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

In my previous call, I served as the pastor of the Presbyterian church in Pacific, which is a small town just west of Six Flags out on 44, and there are two things I really remember well about life in that town. The first was how much it was tied to the railroads. Two main lines went through. One heading to Oklahoma and Texas and the other west to Kansas City and beyond. And I remember how often I would sit at my desk in the parsonage and feel the gentle rocking of my desk and bookcase as the trains came through, and that was pretty often considering there were 50 trains a day. The other was the fact that it was surrounded by family farms that had been owned for generations.

And during the growing season, we would see fields filled with soybeans, and wheat, and milo, and corn, what I like to call both feed corn and food corn. And one farm family was about two miles down the road from the church. And every fall, the Olts would hold a church hayride, and Henry would always pick a night when the moon would be full. I soon learned though that we would not go out for the hayride until

long after sunset. For until the very last moment, he and his brother, and others, would be in the fields harvesting the crops with their headlights on the machinery glowing in the night. And it was then that I really began to understand the holiness of the fields and the farmer. I watched the headlights going up and down, and I found myself wondering, "Where would this particular crop end up? Whose table would it be on?" And I realized how often we can be separated from those fields and people who feed us. Some would have us believe there are only corporate farms left in America. But on those nights in Pacific and the days I rode by the numerous fruit farms in Michigan, so much of what is harvested in this country is from family farms. Their crops and trees tended by people who watch the skies anxiously from the moment the trees flower or the crops are planted until they're ready for market. I begin to realize just how much of their work is sacred work, an act of faith, the holy work of feeding and nourishing us.

Now, Jesus clearly understood about farming, the rhythm of the land, and the seasons, and the tending of crops, and the wheat, and the chaff, and the olive, and pomegranate, and fig trees that produce so much of what was eaten. And he speaks of food for table, and food for body, of bread for living, and the Bread of Life. And he senses the connection between the holy and the every day, the ordinary and the extraordinary. In so many ways, whether it is with water at a well, or food on a hillside, or spittle put on the eyes of a blind man, he takes the common and makes it holy.

Last week when David began this series on the Bread of Life, he reminded us that the Gospels all tell us of the many times that Jesus gathers with other people to eat whether they're mighty or poor, or clean or unclean, whether before his death or after his death. And as I read this morning's passage, I concurred with David that these Bread of Life passages from John can be a bit intense and dramatic. But the imagery is profound and the act of sharing bread powerfully symbolic. And I found myself also thinking maybe it is a misnomer that we call it the Last Supper because in so many ways it was not. The number of times that Jesus shared a meal after his resurrection is significant. Indeed, communion is always a holy and transformative meal, yet the very action shared, bread, drink, and fellowship is one that is part of what could be holy in everyday life. This isn't a fancy ritual, a marching, or a sword, or rare incense, or things being shot. It's very simple. It's a meal. It's something we do every day, but it's more than that.

Consider how many holidays, whether Christmas or the 4th of July, include a meal and a time of fellowship with family and friends. When we gather around the table with people we love, it can be a holy moment if you haven't gone crazy trying to figure out what to cook for dinner. It really can be a holy moment that nourishes us in both body and spirit. It's also a blessing to consider that we have enough, enough to serve those we love with a meal, and we're reminded that we are to also feed others who are hungry. Whether we make a donation to Kirk Care or Room at the Inn, everyone needs to be fed and nourished. And when we do those offerings, that is what we remember. So we are reminded in communion that the giving of food and fellowship are simple yet very profound. And I think that is the power of it, the pure simplicity of what Jesus did. That's what confounded, I think, those of his hometown. He took ordinary elements and transformed them and their meaning. The supper that he and his disciples shared in the Upper Room was Passover, resurrecting the story of the Exodus. It focuses on the meaning given to bread and wine shared in that Passover meal. The simplicity of it all is what is so profound and allows everybody to participate.

I remember a colleague who loved to push the boundaries of rules. And he told his congregation, "Well, the elements don't have to be bread and juice. It can be ice cream and root beer," and so he did. And now, he did use some very carefully chosen and wise words about the symbolism of what they were sharing, and I get that point. But it's the simpleness of the meal that makes me marvel. No expensive animal sacrifices involved. Only the very things that both the rich and the poor had, daily bread and wine, a holy meal. Remembering and gathering, nourishing and healing, something that almost everyone could participate in. But it's hard sometimes to think about the simplicity of it because we live in a world that does not encourage simplicity. We live in a world that encourages us to have more, and buy more, and get more, and to live more complicated lives, a time when wants seem to supersede needs and importance. And Jesus

reminds us that the simple act of gathering around the table with those we love can offer us a deeper meaning and purpose. He showed us that by taking the common, we can make it holy and offer nourishment in very profound ways. He reminds us that acts of faith can be simple and more than enough. He makes the common holy.

And I thought about our youth and how every summer they go on a mission trip, and they've done that for nearly 50 years. They don't stay in fancy hotels. They sleep on church floors. They don't eat out every meal. They often prepare, serve, and clean up a meal. That is pretty straightforward. They don't schuss down mountains or sail on a yacht. Rather, they load up construction material and weed zucchini in massive community gardens, and nail and paint houses and mock-up dog kennels, and tear down and rebuild shelters for those who need a place to live. And in the midst of those daily chores, and conversations, and meals at the table, they become holy moments of transformation, and it changes their lives. I've heard their stories. And in such moments, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. I was struck too by the fact that a simple meal for us that seems ordinary can be something amazing for another.

I was watching CBS. You all know I like the end of their show. They have these wonderful vignettes. And one night, it was the story about Jimmy, a pub owner in North Carolina. A woman had come up to him in the bar and asked if he had found a wallet. It wasn't the money she wanted but the wedding ring in it that she had put on every day when she went to work and took out when she went home. That was in her wallet. Jimmy said, "She was frantic and really concerned, and it became a mission for me." So he decided to screen all the security footage outside of his building. That wasn't easy. He had to watch for three hours before he finally saw the wallet on the bench, and a young man in a hooded sweatshirt come up and took it, and left. Now, eventually, Jimmy figured out who had done that because it's a small town, and he got the young man to confess. He admitted that he had taken cash, but he said, "I didn't find anything else, so I just threw it in the ocean channel." And so Jimmy figured it was long gone. But then something persisted at him, and he hired divers the next day. And they went to the area that the boy pointed out. And they eventually found the wallet, and the ring was still tucked inside.

Now, you might think the story ended there. Jimmy had gone far beyond what an ordinary person would do. But he felt like he needed to do more, not for the woman who lost the wallet but for the thief who took it. I call that the nagging Holy Spirit. "I knew the kid," he said. "I knew he was living in the woods, and it was getting to be 30 degrees outside. He hadn't eaten in two days, and I realized this was no criminal. This was someone who needed a little help." Ron was 17 years old and estranged from his mother and no longer had a home, and he was trying to make it on his own. But it was cold, and it was getting colder. And so it began. Instead of having Mr. Rivers punished, Jimmy invited him to come to his home. And they talked, and soon he was spending the night. And then he moved in, and now he helps around the pub and the house. And there was a short clip at the end of the episode showing them around the dining room table, and we could see Rivers tending to Jimmy's young children as if they were his siblings. And it was clear to me that we so often take things for granted, an ordinary dinner had become extraordinary for him. Not only in sharing bread but the gift of belonging, for Rivers was not only nourished by food but by a sense of family. The closing words where Jimmy Collish could've called on police courts or social services, but instead he called on the best problem solver of all, the compassion within. He offered ordinary things, a meal, a family, shelter, and he turned it into something extraordinary.

The life and love of Jesus teaches us that we all have the power to take the common and make it holy, to nourish not only with food, but with compassion and kindness wherein there are no longer insiders and outsiders but all are welcome at a table, offering grace and kindness just like our Lord. Thanks be to God for the gift of simplicity wherein simple acts of grace become amazing grace and life-giving grace. Amen.