

Fourth Sunday in Lent: John 6:1–15

William Cwirla

Preached for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

The highest form of fellowship is at the table, to eat and drink together. Candlelight dinners. Power lunches. Wedding receptions. Funeral receptions. Thanksgiving dinner. Christmas dinner. Easter dinner. “Let’s do lunch.” The early church always ate together as part of their gathering. Whether in work or play or worship, to eat together is to have fellowship with one another, to have something in common, a common meal together at a common table.

God’s desire is to have table fellowship with us, that we might eat and drink in His presence. The Scriptures begin and end with food. They begin with a diet of fruits and nuts, with God freely dishing out life from the tree of life. And they end at the marriage supper of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end. Sin altered our diet from free food to food we had to work for. No longer free fruits and nuts, but cultivated plants and bread baked by the sweat of our brow. And then there is the Passover, the meal of Exodus freedom. The peace offerings, eaten together at the tabernacle. Or the Sabbath meal, a celebration of creation and redemption. Manna and quail in the wilderness. And Elijah sustained forty days on bread and water supplied by an angel. In this morning’s OT reading we have Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu and the seventy elders of Israel, freshly sprinkled with covenant blood, sitting down on the mountainside of Sinai to eat and drink in the presence of God. Think of Isaiah’s wonderful picture of heaven – a feast of fat meats and fine wines on a mountain where the shroud of death is permanently lifted. That’s God’s restless passion for you. To have you lie down in green pastures, to prepare a table for you in the face of your enemies, to have you eat and drink in His presence.

Jesus had just crossed the Sea of Galilee and headed up the side of a mountain. From the sea to a mountain, from water to wilderness, Jesus leads His little Israel, just like Moses led his Israel in the Sinai wilderness. There is one important difference: On Moses’ mountain only a select few were welcome, a total of 74 in all – Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Ebihu, and a select 70 representatives of Israel. Anyone else would die the moment they set foot on that mountain. The guest list was short, the party exclusive, strictly A-list, no outsider allowed. On Jesus’

mountain anyone is welcome, a great crowd of over 5000 men, not counting women and children. They came for all the wrong reasons. Not to hear Jesus, but because of His miracles. Miracles always draw a crowd of the curious and the desperate. But Jesus doesn't turn them away. He is the Good Shepherd of all the sheep, and even the goats.

John tells us that the Jewish feast of Passover was just around the corner. Soon the Lambs would be slain, innocent one-year olds without spot or blemish. Their blood would be poured out, painted on the doorposts of houses. A sign of life through the death of another. It was a sacrament of the night in Egypt when death passed over the houses marked with the blood of the Lamb painted on the wood. All Israel would eat the lamb, together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, reminding them of their pain and suffering, and the goodness of God. They would share four cups of wine with everyone at the table. A little taste of joy in the midst of sorrow. And in eating and drinking they would remember their freedom, and look forward to the greater Day when they would eat and drink with God forever.

The Passover was near, but here, on this anonymous mountain, God's Lamb, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, settles in with His disciples. It is late in the day. The sun is going down. Soon it will be dark. And the crowd of diseased and demonized and curious is there. The place is set, the table is about to be prepared.

"How are we going to feed all these people?" Jesus asks His disciples. He knows how, but He's testing them. They've seen Him make 180 gallons of wine from washing water at a wedding gone dry. They've seen Him heal the blind, the lame, the demon possessed with nothing more than a word from His mouth. He's looking for some little sign of faith, some inkling that His words are food enough for these people.

Philip thinks in terms of money. He sees the problem economically. They don't have enough money. "You'd have to work over eight months to feed this crowd, and even then they'd get barely more than a bite." Philip sees the problem as a problem of the numbers – money and resources. He knows how much bread costs, and he knows that there is no such thing as a free lunch. Someone will have to pay for it, and the disciples' wallets are too empty. Besides, Jesus had told them not to take their wallets with them.

Andrew is a man of action. He finds a little boy carrying his lunch bag – five barley loaves and a couple of dried fish. Perhaps he was bringing them home to his mother. And now some guys he's never seen before grab hold of him and are talking how they can feed this huge crowd of

people with his bread and fish! It's not enough. You could barely feed one or two people, let alone 5000. How far will these go among so many?

We tend to see things in the way of Philip and Andrew. Money and resources. "We don't have enough money to do that," we say. "We don't have the resources, and what we have is way too little." Five little barley cakes and a couple of fish. We would have told the crowd to leave, go to town before it gets too dark. Find a place for dinner. We can't help you. Come back tomorrow. We'd be wondering in the back of our own minds where we were going to eat. But this is Jesus' mountain, and on His mountain no one who is hungry is ever turned away. He is the Lord – the Creator and Redeemer of all, and this is a little picture of how He works.

He has the people sit down and rest. John tells us that there was much green grass in that place. The Good Shepherd makes His sheep lie down in green pasture. He prepares a table for them, and the cup runs over. Five thousand men sat down in that green pasture, along with women and children, the crowd could easily have been twice that size. Jesus took the five little loaves and two small fish into his hands, He gave thanks, and He distributed them to those who were seated there. Sound familiar? Of course it does. Your ears are tuned to hear it. It's a Lord's supper, isn't it? Not quite the Lord's Supper, but certainly a Lord's supper. He's the chef.

He takes a little boy's meager lunch, and turns it into a feast for 5000. Not even Martha Steward can pull that one off! Notice how He works through means – ordinary, humble means. A little boy's lunch. He doesn't turn stones into bread. He was tempted once by the devil to do that when He was hungry in the wilderness. But that isn't Jesus' way to do things. He works through the creation – in, with, and under the creation. Not around it or in spite of it. And so He takes these humble means – five barley loaves and two fish – and He multiplies them far beyond what they could accomplish. When Jesus takes bread into His hands, gives thanks, and distributes it, watch out! Big things happen.

This is bread no one works for. Free, gracious bread. In Genesis, bread is the food of affliction. It is part of the punishment of our sin. Previously Adam and Eve ate the free food of fruits and nuts, food you didn't work for. But bread you work for and sweat over. You work and sweat when you plant the grain, when you harvest it, when you mill it, when you knead the dough and bake it. There is sweat at every turn in making bread. And even though we have bread machines and a bread aisle in the grocery store, there is still a price to pay. There is no such thing as a free lunch, the economist Milton Friedman once said, echoing the disciple Philip. Someone always has to pay.

But this is Jesus' mountain, and on Jesus' mountain there is such a thing as a free lunch. Bread without sweat. Fish without fishing. Even the manna had to be gathered, there was work involved. But here all the people had to do was sit there on the nice, cool, green grass. This was free bread – to fill over 5000 growling bellies that day. I assume the little boy got his lunch back, and more. All of it without cost to the consumer. And as if to underscore the point for the slow of heart to believe, a perfect Israelite twelve baskets of leftovers were gathered. One for each disciple. A perfect twelve. They ate with God in the Flesh on His mountain, and their baskets were filled to overflowing with the abundance of His grace.

The people wanted to make Jesus king that day, by force if necessary. And who wouldn't? It's an election year, and we've already had our fill of the politicians' promises to put a chicken in every pot and a loaf in every bread box. Make Jesus king, they said. Put Him in charge of the food supply, and we'll never be hungry again. Set Jesus in charge and world hunger would disappear in a heartbeat. An endless supply of free bread for all. But He already is in charge, and "the poor you will always have with you." And we really don't need Jesus to multiply our loaves and fishes to feed the poor. We need only share our daily bread with those who have none. Jesus declines to be made a bread King. He refuses to put a patch on the old cloth. He has a bigger feast in mind.

He withdrew to another mountain by Himself, John says.

That solitary mountain is His alone to occupy, and He occupies it for us all. It isn't like imposing Sinai. It isn't like the anonymous mountain in Galilee with its fresh green grass. Jesus' mountain is barely a mound of dirt, a little knob of a hill outside the city gates of Jerusalem with three crosses pounded into them. There, between noon and three in the darkness on a very good Friday, the Bread of Life was baked in the fire of God's wrath against our sin, and His burning passion to save us. Philip was right, more than he imagined. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Someone always has to pay. Jesus did. He picked up the tab, and paid it in full. The feast is on Him, and He is the feast. "The bread which I give for the life of the world is my flesh," He said.

Luther once remarked that, in the Lord's Supper, Jesus is our chef, our waiter, and our food. He is the Bread of Life, bread that you may eat and live forever. He is living Bread come to from heaven. Manna in our wilderness. Bread to fill the sin-starved heart hungry for forgiveness. Food to fill the emptiness that gnaws away at us, an emptiness that can't be filled by our fast foods of self-help and the junk food of religion. Jesus is a food that doesn't spoil. All

other food is dead, which is why we have preservative and refrigerators. Our food is dead – the carrots, the cow, the cauliflower. It's all dead, and we eat it to our death. But the food that Jesus gives is filled with His death-defeating life, food that lasts to Resurrection Day and the marriage supper of the Lamb in His kingdom which has no end.

You can't afford this feast, so don't even bother to reach for your credit card. You can leave home without it. And all your efforts to earn a spot at this table amount to little more than a little boy's lunch of five loaves and two fish in the face of 5000 hungry men.

All you can do is rest in the rich green pastures of the church and be fed with a bread you didn't earn, a bread you can't buy or make for yourself. This food is pure gift, from Jesus to you. Take this bread and eat it. It is the body of Christ given for you. Take this cup and drink it. It is the blood of Christ, the blood of the new covenant, shed for you. This is the Lord's mountain, His Supper, and you are His guest. Here you eat and drink in the presence of God. And you are filled to overflowing with the death that brings you life.

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

In the name of Jesus, Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "John 6:1-15 (10 Pentecost B)", posted 2000-08-20 (<https://htlcms.org/2000/08/john-61-15-10-pentecost-b/>).