

## FOOD THAT PERISHES

Personally, I like to eat. To some degree, it gives a person a feeling of well-being. So many simple dimensions take on so many layers of significance. If we eat in pleasant surroundings, it doubles the feeling of well-being. If we eat with other people who are friendly and warm, it quintuples the whole benefit. If somebody fussed over the food to make it special, well, in some mysterious equation, that comes out to mean *we* are special. Food prepared by loving hands, in calmness and peace, is both nourishing and healing. What is the opposite? Fast Food – the way most of America cooks and eats. Why do they call it Fast Food? Because for all the good it does, you might as well be fasting. But let's not get into that.

From all indications, Jesus loved to eat. Over and over, when the Gospels zoom in on Him, we find Him eating with somebody – Zacchaeus, Simon the Pharisee, Mary and Martha, tax collectors and sinners. His detractors often used it to discredit Him: He should be fasting, and telling His disciples to fast. He should be acting more “religious” – grim and serious – and engaging in self-denying activities. After all, God does not like it if we have any fun. All religious people know that. *“The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”* (Matthew 11:19)

The parables and teachings of Jesus frequently depict the Kingdom of Heaven in the imagery of a banquet. Whatever you may think of eternal life or the spiritual domain, if we are to trust the hints we get from Jesus, there will be a lot of eating going on: a lot of shared meals, a lot of table fellowship. It all leads up to the obvious remark that a shared meal is the central sacrament, and a loaded symbol event, of the Christian Life. Maybe, just maybe, teaching our children how to conduct themselves, carry on an appropriate conversation, and enjoy themselves at a family meal is one of the most important things we ever do.

I am not leaving out the Cross, or the Resurrection – you know I never want to do that. Nevertheless, there are two general images that always compel and instruct us about Christianity: We are a Pilgrim People – always on a journey – followers of a WAY – followers of Jesus Christ, who *is* the WAY. And we eat together. We are always either traveling or eating together.

The thing is, we are also always inviting others to share the journey with us. If not, we are not on the journey, at least not on the Christian journey. So guess what? We are also always inviting others to eat with us. We are always either taking steps along the Way, or eating together. And as we cross paths with other human beings, we invite them to share the journey, and the meals. We are supposed to eat together, and invite others to share the meal with us if they like. And I think we are supposed to *keep* doing that, including on the most mundane, simple, physical, and practical levels. Any time you want to do more for the Kingdom – more for your Lord – and you don't know what else to do, invite somebody to dinner, share a meal with them. Something may or may not come of it, but you will have set it up so the Spirit can act if the Spirit wants to.

Anyway, we are on a Path, and from time to time we stop and eat together. All of Christendom can be seen and found within this simple framework. We are on a journey, and along the WAY, we eat together. And you can fit and understand the life of the church – the called-out people of Jesus – within this simple imagery.

So now I want to line out one more time an issue which has plagued the church from the beginning, and is no less an issue in our time. I will try to do it gently. Being on a spiritual pilgrimage, sharing meals, and inviting others into our fellowship seem too tame, simplex, and puerile to some people. Of course, it doesn't seem so simple and puerile to anyone who actually *tries* it. Getting up each morning and consciously turning your life over to the guidance of the Holy Spirit is neither as simple nor as one-dimensional as it might sound in theory. Those who try it find themselves into more assignments than they can keep up with, and eventually have to start giving up some of their other activities in order to stay faithful. But it doesn't always *sound* very active, especially to people nurtured in the more recent traditions of the United Church of Christ. They want some stronger image of the people of God going into the world to fight evil, injustice, and poverty – to right the wrongs – to turn the world toward peace and love. The UCC believes we can do this with very little devotion, dedication, commitment, or sacrifice. This attitude happens when we get based on human wisdom instead of on Christ. The average member of the UCC has sporadic attendance; gives less than three percent of their usable income to the church; seldom studies any Scripture; prays only in emergencies; almost never invites anybody to come to church (why bother?); never talks with anybody else about Jesus; and essentially believes that human wisdom has gone way

past anything we need to learn today from Jesus or the Bible. I have not forgotten about my promise to be gentle. This is simply the situation. You have no idea how grateful I am that *this* is not a “normal” United Church of Christ.

Every time the church takes on “saving the world” as its primary purpose, it loses its own soul. I do not mean in some Christian sense of redemptive suffering. I mean it loses its identity, forgets its Lord, and eventually destroys the bonds of fellowship, support, and love between its own members. Soon no individual has worth except in the light of their fight against the overt evils of the world – overt and nonpersonal. The relationship between God and individuals is lost entirely, or seen only as a secondary support system for winning the fight against the evils or injustices of the world. Jesus is relegated to the position of mascot or cheerleader – or forgotten entirely. Prayer degenerates into us asking God to help us with our plans and battles, rather than us, as servants, seeking God’s will for our lives.

Soon the church is seen as a recruiting station for calling more people to take up arms against the world’s evils. The church is no longer considered to be important in its own right or to have a meaningful life of its own. Its only justification is the number of people and the amount of resources it can muster for the battles on the outside – against overt evil. Any time or money it spends on itself is resented – seen as wasteful – and frequently condemned. After all, how much money should we spend on a recruitment center? The war is what’s important. And the war is always somewhere else. The pastor’s job is to call people to the causes, and maybe, if possible, keep up morale. Even better if he or she wakes up and personally leads the troops into battle against one or another of the world’s ills.

If Jesus is referred to at all, He is pictured as a political prophet who came to set up a kingdom of right behavior and good deeds. Palm Sunday and cleansing the temple are seen to outweigh all the time spent teaching, preaching, forming the disciple bands, talking to individuals, healing, praying. The Cross and the Resurrection are reduced to an ancient object lesson – a reassurance that the good guys may have to suffer, but they will win the fight for righteousness in the end. No other level of significance or meaning is noticed or mentioned. I am not saying there are no exceptions. I am saying this is the standard fare.

My heresy (or the truth, however it turns out) is that the church is the core of the mission, and that building the church (not buildings or

institutions, of course, but the fellowship and support groups of Christian pilgrims) – building the disciple bands, the faith families – is *the most* important thing we can do as faithful servants and followers of Jesus. We do not recruit people into the church to send them into the world. We are already in the world – all of us. We recruit people into the church to BE the church – the *ecclesia*, the people who love Jesus. We recruit those who have turned their own lives over to prayer, study, and obedience – who have sworn covenant love with each other in Jesus’ name. We participate in the world, but as sent servants, never as saviors – never as those expecting to put down Satan by our own power and prowess.

So it is good to show caring for people who are hungry or homeless or in whatever kind of trouble. But it is far more important to invite them into the church – into a fellowship where they will be loved and known as real people, and where they can learn to study and pray and eat and grow as loved children, and servants of Jesus themselves. In short: **The church does not support missions. The church IS the mission.**

I don’t care much about getting the church into the world. Every Christian convert who tries to live a life of prayer and obedience *is* the church in the world. We do not *go* to church – we *are* the church. But I *do* care about getting the world into the church: getting the people who have never known God’s love for them and God’s plans for them – or who have forgotten – to some place where Christ’s people will share the journey and the meals with them, until they begin to trust the love and support, feel the Kingdom, and want to be part of the LIFE and WAY that are bigger and more important than this world.

Personally, I like to eat. I know Jesus liked to eat. I like it a lot when other people get to eat too. And it hurts to know that there are hungry people, and more of them every year. Something is clearly and obviously wrong. I have a lot of crusader in me, and I get severely tempted to go to war against all the evil forces that are perpetuating overpopulation, greed, waste, and injustice, condemning the world to increasing poverty and an ever-disintegrating quality of life. And I would dearly love to pretend that these are all outer problems and have nothing whatsoever to do with who I am or what I am like on the inside.

Yes, I would love to help feed hungry people, and I do. But I also study the Scriptures, and I know it is Satan’s trap if we put our emphasis there. The true battle is deeper and more subtle than that. If Satan were a pushover, we could just organize feeding programs and it would soon be over. We would be one big, happy, peaceful family on earth. But Satan

is Lucifer, so we have to build church schools and teach our children the traditions, the Scriptures, and how to really mean business when they pray. Satan is Lucifer, so we cannot fix the world – we have to become the church that lives “in but not of the world.”

Why does it matter whether anybody eats or not? It matters because they are more than they appear to be on the surface. It matters because this life is bigger than its physical dimensions. Someone starving is a tragedy because they are so much more than the body, and their hunger is so much more than mere physical hunger.

It is important to feed hungry people when we can. But we follow One who reminds us: “*Man does not live by bread alone.*” We are supposed to be feeding people with a lot more than bread. How and in what context can we do that? If we send all our money to “Bread for the World” and let the churches die, or allow the church schools to turn into mere babysitting programs, have we served the Christ or furthered the Kingdom of Heaven? Every dime we spend to make a true fellowship of Christians stronger is worth fifty times that amount spent to “fix the world.” That is because every Christian is going to be used by the Spirit to change people, not just feed them. The power of the Gospel will change the way they think, feel, live, care, *everything*. If they dwell in a support community of other Christians, their influence will spread, but it will spread most, and most importantly, by their *being* there – so others can come into the Christian fellowship also, and find and walk a New WAY. Where is the greater influence: the family you live in on a daily basis, or the organization you participate in for three hours nine times a year? Where is the greater influence: the cause you support with a few hundred dollars once a year, or the vocation you pour forty to sixty hours a week into for thirty-five or forty years? The mainline churches today keep trying to major in minors – draw us off into the sideshows and side-eddies of life that can be made to “sound” dramatic but never make any significant difference to people’s relationship with God. A true church is a WAY of Life, an integral part of who we are – our very identity – shaping and empowering relationships, family, vocation, recreation, *everything* ... not just a short-range, one-dimensional crusade against the favorite evil-of-the-month.

We have been learning all over again what the church used to know and demonstrate with incredible impact in the world: You cannot hear a Message *and keep it* without a support community that shares and cares and works the Message with you. Nobody who means business in

our world tries to give one good message or do one good deed and then walk away as if they had accomplished something. They all insist that a follow-through support group is necessary, or no good will come of it. Every coach, every AA group, every teacher, every drug addict, every company trainer knows this. How can the church have forgotten? I once had the opportunity to ask a physical trainer at an athletic club if he liked his job. He said a few people made it worthwhile, but that most never stayed on a program long enough to get any real benefit. He even worried that it was worse for their bodies to start and stop or be erratic than never to begin at all. “Don’t misunderstand,” he said. “Most of the people who come here are really nice people. But they try to keep up with so many things, they can’t really keep up with anything. I have to find someplace where I can make a bigger difference.”

Personally, I like to eat. But it is not my major reality. It was not Jesus’ major reality either. And every time I get near to Jesus or His Story, I am reminded of how true that is. Even though we are in this physical world, many dimensions call to us louder than the physical. I want more in my life – more for my living and striving – than just eating. I would be enormously insulted – feel totally misunderstood – if you thought the only thing I cared about was feeding my face. Truly I do not live to eat. In many blessed ways, eating takes on dimensions beyond physical feeding, but primarily I eat to live, not live to eat.

*“Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life.”* After feeding the five thousand, Jesus was insulted that all they wanted from Him was full bellies. He had so much more to offer – He *wanted* to offer so much more. But they were enthralled at the lowest level of satisfaction, and wanted to proclaim Him King and Messiah on that basis. Jesus would have none of it. He had only wanted to share the closeness after the teaching, hoping they could experience the meal together as a metaphor for the bonds of discipleship that were now open to them. But they had become fixated on the food level, and so Jesus then literally deserted them – He ran away. If that was what they really cared about, He was no longer interested.

*“Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life.”* I like to eat, but that is not the primary thing I want for myself – it is not the primary interest I have for my life, or yours. Then why would we as a church ever pretend that it is our primary concern or purpose for others?

If I love you and I have food, I will share it with you. This is not some deep, dark mystery, nor is it some new law I have to be taught. It is automatic. You do not have to bring God Incarnate into the world to teach me to share food with people I love.

But you *do* have to bring God Incarnate into the world to make me believe that the love I feel is real and worth living for – and to get me to believe that the people I start caring about are eternal and worth far more than the world around us acts like or ever dares to dream of. You *do* have to bring God Incarnate into the world to activate a hope in me that makes living in a faith family worth my time and life – and that makes inviting others into it one of the top priorities of my life.

So I am not ready to trade theology for sociology, or faith for works – or Jesus for all of it put together. “*Do not labor for the food that perishes.*” Deal with it, eat it, share it, but that is not what we are living for – that is not what we are for or about. Get into a Bible Study fellowship group, or some spiritual growth and support group. If you don’t like any group that’s already going, start a group on some new basis that makes sense to you. We need all the disciple bands we can get. But stop listening to people who tell you that the church is important for what it does outside itself. What it does outside itself is a very minor sideshow. Who the church invites into its life and love and fellowship – *that* is what truly matters. What the church does as the church, as itself, as the body of Christ – *that* is how it truly loves and truly cares, and how it truly makes a difference in this world.

If you have been ashamed to help build the church and make it strong in its own right, I hope you will get over that. It is the external goal of Jesus’ followers to make the church strong so that those who pass through this world may find His Message and His presence and His support community as a beacon and a comfort on the WAY. And more than that, they will find it an alternative to the secular life being lived all around them – a new way to live, a different truth to live for, a different kind of Kingdom to help build. Only please remember: We are not talking about making the outer institution strong. We are talking about making the fellowship of believers strong – the loving community – the place that carries the Message and keeps the hope alive. Important as this world is, we are only here for a short time. “*Do not labor for the bread that perishes.*” And do not let that be the only thing you offer to others.