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Why Eat *This* Bread?

A sermon given by
Rev. Lew Hinshaw
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In our scripture readings this morning we heard two Bible stories about bread. In the first, God feeds the people in the wilderness with manna—bread from heaven—to satisfy their hunger and to quiet their complaint against Moses that they would rather be fed as slaves in Egypt than die of hunger as a free people on the way to the Promised Land to find a home of their own. In the second story Jesus feeds five thousand people with a few loaves and several fish. He follows up the feeding of the five thousand with a teaching about what it means to never be hungry again. “I am the bread of life,” Jesus said. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Now I suggest to you that these are excellent stories to ponder in the context of celebrating the sacrament of holy communion. They raise questions, the answers to which may well lie on the communion table along with the loaves and the chalices. What is the deepest human hunger? Why is it that I want more than what I need? How can my deepest wants be satisfied? What kind of bread was Jesus talking about? Why eat *THIS* bread, this communion bread, this “Jesus bread?” For the next few minutes I invite you to take a good look at this table—to experience it, to sense it with all your senses, to be mindful of it, to open your heart to it, and to meditate upon your hunger and the food God offers.

Knowing our deepest hunger—knowing what we really want—is more difficult than we might expect. We are often quick to say that our deepest hunger is for God, and that is true enough. We can go on from there to ponder what it is about us that needs God, and what it is about God that fills our need. If you receive the sacrament frequently, I’ll wager you have devoted some time to pondering just such questions and searching for some answers. There are many.

In a recent issue of the Kansas City Star, a front page article told of a ministry that has been established in south Kansas City for several years, a ministry called the International House of Prayer, or—forgive the brand similarity—IHOP for short. At the International House of Prayer, worship and prayer are happening 24 hours a day, seven days a week. IHOP was founded by the charismatic pastor Mike Bickle, who says the purpose of the worship at IHOP is to hasten the second coming. This is sort of turning a blind eye to the warnings in the Bible about the second coming happening on God’s schedule. Is this the deepest human hunger, the physical return of Jesus to earth?

The newspaper story also tells of a young worshipper at IHOP shouting out through the din of music and uttered prayers, “Raise us up to be your army, Jesus. Come and fill the void of this generation.” Is this the deepest human hunger, to be a Christian soldier in Jesus’ army?

According to Matthew Fox, a leading scholar of world religions, healthy spirituality is one thing that can make human existence meaningful and give us the courage and creativity to navigate our way through life. It is clear, he also said, that once we return to the depth or core of religion we find much more than dogmas, concepts, institutions and commands. We find, he said, a striving for experience of the divine. Is this the deepest human hunger, to experience the divine?

In his best-selling book, *The Shack*, William Paul Young tells a story of a father grieving the death of one of his children. As part of the healing process Mack, the main character, returns to the shack where his child was killed—thus the title of the book. There he meets the three persons of the Trinity. In the story, as he finishes getting a lesson from Jesus about walking on water, Mack talks about how even if he could somehow overcome his grief, life is just so complex. It doesn't seem like even that would be enough. Mack says, "I don't know how to change the world." Jesus says to him, "No one is asking you to. All I want from you is to trust me with what little you can, and grow in loving the people around you with the same love I share with you. It's not your job to change or convince them. You are free to love without an agenda." Is this the deepest human hunger, to love and to be loved without an agenda?

Deepak Chopra's novel *Jesus* tells the story, Chopra says, of the Jesus who was left out of the New Testament, the enlightened Jesus. It is a story based on the premise that Jesus wanted his followers to reach the same unity with God that he had reached. Near the end of the novel, Chopra retells the incident of the woman accused of adultery as we are familiar with it from the gospel of John, Chapter 8. In Chopra's account, as the accusers leave the scene after having been challenged by Jesus to throw a stone only if they themselves are without sin, one of them turns back to question Jesus. "Who are you to this whore?" the elder demanded. "She has a husband. She greatly offended him." "I am her soul's husband," replied Jesus, "and I am never offended." Is this the deepest human hunger, to know that God is never offended by who we are?

All of these human hungers, all these hungers of the human heart, lie on this communion table. Pondering them may help us to see with our spiritual eyes that our own hearts' deepest desires lie there also, perhaps in simpler terms than these I have quoted but every bit as real, perhaps even something as simple as the prayer, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner," uttered with absolutely no fear. To see our deepest hungers really there on the Lord's table and to see the real presence of the living bread, the risen Christ, there at the table also, and to see them under, beside, among, and around each other is to stand on the threshold of the healing and wholeness we seek not only in the sacrament but in life itself—human hunger.

Okay, that's the view from our side of the table, as guests. What about the view from the host's side of the table? What is Jesus looking for here? What does Jesus see? Another current Christian writer has said, "Jesus' teaching ministry cannot be separated from his food ministry." Sometimes in the gospels Jesus is host at a meal, sometimes a guest, sometimes a servant. Sometimes Jesus dined with the rich, sometimes with the poor. Sometimes Jesus dined with the righteous and sometimes with sinners, but mostly Jesus dined with the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, the poor, the orphans, the widows and the hungry. But with whomever Jesus dined, that dinner became a messianic banquet of revolutionary consequences. Wow!

How can a simple dinner with Jesus have revolutionary consequences? Because such a meal modeled a feast of an endless table that had room for the outcasts, room for those who were not considered good enough and that were looked down on as outsiders. So friends, you can take this with you from the service today. You can write this down: When Jesus is at the table there are revolutionary consequences.

Christian theology says that the sacrament is a mystery, that something mystical happens here, that something changes, and we don't have a simple comfortable word for this change, so we use big intimidating words for it—words like transubstantiation, transfiguration, transformation—words we will never fully understand. That's okay. The reality is that by the grace of God, change does happen. The change is this: The point of view of the host becomes the point of view of all the guests.

What is that point of view? Simply this: Everyone has a place. Everyone is loved without an agenda. Everyone is the soul mate of the Holy One who is never offended by who we are. To put it in biblical and theological terms, that realization, that new view, that view of the host that we have—that realization is the living bread. That is heaven come down to earth. That is the second coming of Jesus Christ. That is the banquet of the kingdom. That is the bread that never spoils. That is the bread enough for the day. That is the food that satisfies our deepest hunger. That is the new creation. And, as "Church Lady" on Saturday Night Live used to say, "Well, isn't that just precious."

I quote her not to cheapen the sacrament, but rather to say even that's not all. As mystical and amazing and transforming as it is, the communion table is not the end. It is in fact only one of the first steps in the Christian journey of faith. The holy banquet modeled at this table is both the Messiah's coming-home party and the urgent call of Jesus to look at all human tables from the divine perspective. What are the human tables? There is a food table. There is an energy table. There is a housing table. There is a health care table. There is a living wage table. There is a civil rights table. This names only a few. What perspective do we Christians bring to these tables? Who are the guests and who is the host? Who belongs and who does not, and why?

Friends, I cannot avoid this conclusion: Any table where some are not seated or not welcome or who have no place is a table where Jesus himself has been excluded, where minds and hearts are closed to truth itself. God, have mercy upon us.

I want to close the sermon with an invitation. This morning we are going to serve communion here at the front, and we are going to invite people to come forward and break the bread and dip it in the cup. As you come forward to receive the sacrament, do so mindful that you are rubbing shoulders with saints and sinners, with the great and with the not-so-great, with some doubters and some believers, with those who are hurting and those who are healing.

As you break the bread and dip into the cup, be mindful that God sees only beloved sons and daughters. Be mindful that when a server offers you the loaf saying, "The living bread, hunger no more," and the chalice saying, "The cup of joy, thirst no more," it is the eyes of Jesus looking at you, the hands of Jesus serving you, the lips of Jesus speaking to you. Be mindful that it is Jesus ahead of you in the line and Jesus behind

you in the line—you know, the ones you keep bumping into and the ones who keep bumping into you, just like in real life. Be mindful that what is happening here is more than a mere symbol. What is happening is real: real people, with real hungers and real hurts, and a real host offering grace enough for the day, healing and making whole not just you, but humankind, feeding your deepest hunger. Be mindful and be grateful. Amen.