

## WHAT FEEDS YOU

Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21

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“What is it that feeds you?”

Someone posed that question to me many years ago at some kind of summer gathering. This woman omitted all the usual questions when we met, the questions like, “What do you do?” “Are you married?” “Children?” She skipped the small talk about the yummy buffet and the hot weather.

She seemed a little bit ... well, intense ... but kind, as she asked, “What feeds your soul?”

It’s a great question. And though it was an awkward one to answer in that context, it is one we might ask one another frequently. As members of the Body of Christ, Buck Mountain Episcopal Church branch, we have the responsibility to look out for the upkeep of one another’s souls. Now THERE’s a daunting thought! Not only do we need to be polite and welcoming and friendly ... not only do we need to take part in the Procession of the Casseroles when someone is ill or a loved one has died ... not only do we need to support the church financially and do what we can to provide for our corporate life as volunteers ... we need to check in on each other’s eternal souls!

In the Church of England a few centuries ago, the great poet George Herbert served as a parish priest. He wrote a book, *The Country Parson*, that explains in details the manifold duties and responsibilities of that office. Among many other things, Parson Herbert recommends that the parish priest visit the homes of his parishioners continually and without invitation or warning. Once there, he is to check up on them, educate them, and reprove them. He writes that, “The Parson questions what order is kept in the house, as about prayers morning and evening on their knees, reading of Scripture, catechizing, singing of Psalms at their work, and on holy days....”

Parson Herbert is telling parish priests not to be embarrassed to be nosy in the name of Jesus. Today this would be understood as extending to all of us, not just the ordained. We aren’t likely to undertake such an invasive approach, but we all might do well to consider holy nosiness – to think about getting in each other’s faces – nicely – and ask: *What is feeding your soul?* Because our souls most definitely are one another’s business. **We** are each other’s business, and Jesus makes that very clear in the account of the feeding of the 5,000 we heard today. He made it the disciples’ business to feed those 5,000 – he wouldn’t stand for anything less.

When Jesus sees a large crowd coming toward him – again – what is his first thought? According to John’s Gospel, he immediately wants to know how he and the

disciples are going to feed them. I love the feeding miracles, because they make it very clear that Jesus was concerned with the physical health, well-being, and comfort of all the people. Not for him the dualistic notion that our souls are holy and our bodies profane! No, he is busy feeding and healing, apparently without concern for who is a saint and who is a sinner. He is dedicated to the bodily well-being of the people of God, and that means ALL people.

But there is another aspect to these massive picnics hosted by Jesus, and especially so in John's account. There is a feeding of souls going on here, and though it may not be apparent at first reading, there is a foreshadowing of the Eucharist, the ultimate food for our souls.

First, we need to take note of a seemingly insignificant detail, reported only by John: That the feeding of the 5,000 took place near the time of the Passover festival. Just prior to this passage, at the end of chapter 5, Jesus had complained that his opponents did not understand what Moses had written. Then John moves immediately to report on the feeding miracle, which has remarkable echoes of events associated with Moses and the Passover. Let me draw this out for you for a moment, because it's important in understanding the depth of significance of the feeding of the 5,000 – and it's important to the feeding of our souls.

Echo #1: Bread and Water. Both in Chapter 6 of John's Gospel and in the Book of Exodus, events of supernatural feeding and salvation from the sea are joined together. In Exodus, God feeds the people manna and parts the sea so they can complete their escape from slavery. In John, Jesus miraculously multiplies a few provisions to feed thousands, then saves the disciples from a storm a sea.

Echo #2: Testing. In Exodus, when God tells Moses that he is going to provide manna for the people of Israel, he says he will test them to see if they follow his instructions. In John, Jesus asks the disciples where to buy bread for the people, and he asks it to test them.

Echo #3: No Waste. In Exodus, Moses tells the people not to waste any manna by trying to keep it overnight. In John, Jesus tells the disciples to gather up the crumbs of bread so that nothing will be wasted.

Echo #4: THE Mountain. You will remember that Moses met God on Mount Sinai – THE mountain in Hebrew history. If you said "the" mountain instead of "a" mountain, Jewish readers would immediately think of Sinai. Rather strangely, John says that Jesus goes up to "the" mountain and withdraws again to "the" mountain after the feeding story. All four Gospels recount the feeding miracle, but only John's refers to "the" mountain. With the other parallels to the Exodus story going on here, you have to wonder if this is another deliberate echo, a carefully drawn parallel between Moses and Jesus.

Echo #5: Complain, Complain, Complain. In the Exodus story, the people grumble – a lot. A little further on in Chapter 6 of John’s Gospel, the people also grumble, this time because Jesus says he is the bread that came down from heaven.

This is too many echoes to be accidental. John is working here to let people know that Jesus is a prophet like Moses, and that he is carrying out God’s will by feeding God’s people, and that it is God’s will to continue to liberate God’s people from slavery of all kinds, whether the slavery is forced labor under the Egyptians or occupation under the Romans, or the hunger caused by poverty, or the self-imposed slavery of sin and alienation from God. Whatever kind of slavery we are caught up by, God wants to spring us from the trap, God offers us the Passover that we particularly need.

And where, for us, does that Passover occur?

I think you will hear another echo in verse 11: “Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted” (NIV). He took the bread, he broke it, he blessed it, he gave it. John makes the meaning clear by using a particular Greek verb: *eucharisteo*. It means, literally, to give thanks, and it is the term that has come to mean “Holy Communion” to all of us. The Eucharist, the giving of thanks, the feeding of the people.

The Eucharist is at once an extension of and the culmination of the great Passover feast. Jesus builds on the Passover themes of liberation and salvation when he institutes the Eucharist, but in his hands the act of breaking bread and drinking wine take on a whole new aspect. Those humble, everyday acts become conveyances for the ultimate love of God for God’s people, love that would lead Jesus to the cross. Love that knows no boundaries. Love that seeks to cure every soul. Love that will stop at nothing. That is what God wants to feed you. Nothing less than ultimate and eternal love.

So, what do you do to feed your soul?

Years ago, when faced with this question, I thought about music and poetry and long walks on the beach. I had staged a bit of a stand-off with God at that point, so I didn’t think of prayer of church or the Eucharist. I thought of the people I loved and the things and places where I felt refreshed. Looking back, I believe God was feeding me through those people and things, moving me gently along towards healing, always offering an olive branch in the most tender way possible, even though he had done nothing to create the divide I had placed between us.

I wouldn’t receive the Eucharist then, because of my various hurt feelings and intellectual questions and cherished indignation about the state of the world and especially the state of the Church. But that did not stop God from feeding me.

It is the same for every human being. We need to be fed – physically and spiritually – and God is determined to feed and nurture our souls. We who are here today are blessed to be here, to be drawn here by the Son of God who tells us, “You did not

choose me, but I chose YOU.” Yes, YOU! Yes, “you” individually, but also and most especially “you” – “we” as a group, “we” as an intertwined group of souls who feed each other and are fed by God in one another’s company.

We, together, are blessed together to be willing spiritually to come to the Lord’s Table and receive his gifts. We must be a group of at least two even to celebrate the Eucharist; a priest cannot do it on her own. We know, by the grace of God we know, that we are hungry, and that we need to be fed, and that we will find what our souls most deeply need right here at this altar, together. We can’t even begin to comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height of the love of God, but here it is, offered for you, offered to you, in the simple act of feeding you who are hungry: Here it is, his Body, his Blood, the Bread of Heaven and the Cup of Salvation – all that we need, and more.

AMEN.