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Text: Psalm 51:10-12, John 6:24-35

Feeding Body and Spirit

Sometimes when you need to get out of the woods, you really need to get out of the woods. On our recent mission trip to Maine, we worked on several projects deep in the trees—OK, maybe not deep but in far enough that the extra strength bug spray hardly deterred the mosquitos and black flies from munching us at will. One evening after hanging up our tools, we got out of there as fast as we could.

After a hard day, we decided to treat ourselves. We loaded up our oversized van and zipped to the nearest grocery store. The plan was simple: we were going to throw the ultimate barbecue. It just so happened that my old college roommate was at his nearby vacation home with an extra-large grill, and so we gathered dinner supplies. Chips and salsa, meat, veggies, and skewers for kebabs, garden and potato salad, and, of course, biscuits, berries, and whip cream for strawberry shortcake.

After a few hours of swimming, waterskiing, and prepping the meal together, we finally sat down to eat. Gathered at the dining room table, we said a simple grace and then made our way through the courses. We shared a long meal that overflowed with jokes, stories, and silly debates, such as whether Moxie soda is disgusting, delicious, or mislabeled toilet cleaner. When none of us could hardly eat another bite, we cleaned up before passing the rest of the evening with an overly competitive game of cards. Driving back to camp, we left with more than full stomachs.

If I wanted to re-experience that evening's fullness of joy, how would I do it? Some might suggest gathering the same group of people. Others would suggest heading to the same place. Another might try to replicate the shopping list or the card games. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that moments where we feel so profoundly fed are made up of more than the sum of their parts. Nevertheless, attempting to get all of the details right to whip up the experience seduces us into believing that we can summon those feelings by our own efforts.

It is hard to blame the crowd for wanting to bottle up the magic of their encounters with Jesus. He was a magnetic personality who spoke the truth and offered compassion to the afflicted. In a moment nothing short of miraculous, he fed the crowd of over five-thousand with only five loaves and two fish. Wanting to keep the good times rolling, they tried to make him king. This prompted Jesus to flee.

When the crowds finally catch up with Jesus in today's passage, he scolds the them for reducing the miracle of multiplication to bread and filled stomachs. As so happens in the gospels, the crowds simply does not get it. They ask for concrete signs while missing the one they just experienced.

The crowd fails to understand that Jesus' presence itself feeds by opening our minds to the work of God unfolding before our very eyes. He says to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who *gave* you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who *gives* you the true bread from heaven." The change of tense from the past to the present in these two clauses is critical to his point.¹ While it is obvious to the crowd that the manna came from God through Moses in ages past and Jesus just a short time ago, the gift of manna is not something restricted to special moments in the past. God is presently sharing this

¹ Susan Hulen, "John 6:24-35 Commentary," The Working Preacher, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3739.

bread of life in the world because Jesus is the embodiment of God's living word that has always been among us. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is the bread that forever fills us because he never perishes. He was in the beginning and forever shall be.

If you are a little confused at this point, that's OK. The crowd struggles to understand Jesus and frankly so do I. In this reading, however, it is clear that Jesus is not a concept for us to understand rationally but rather a reality for us to experience. Trying to pinpoint exactly how Jesus feeds us is like trying to explain systematically the communion I felt during the mission trip barbecue. I could have listed the name of the lake we swam in or the brand of marinade we used for the kebabs, but God doesn't feed our bodies and spirits that way. God feeds by inviting us into the story of abundant life in Jesus.

This reading is helpful during the summer months when many of us are fortunate enough to take advantage of much needed vacation or at least a little slow down. We can loosen our grip on some responsibilities as a reminder that the world keeps spinning without our active care. Rather than focusing on the minutiae of executing the tasks of each day, we can open our eyes to how God is working in the bigger picture. We can try to enjoy some of the food that feeds our body and spirit as it comes.

I must admit that I am still learning the ropes of vacationing well. I tend to be like the crowd conversing with Jesus in today's reading. I get nostalgic for the old times when I felt filled to the brim and try to recreate them. Even during vacation, I often bite off more than I can chew trying not to miss anything.

One morning this past month, I encouraged Elizabeth to come on a hike with me. I assured her that I had summited Pleasant Mountain before, and it would be no longer than an hour to the top. In typical summer fashion, my memory was a bit hazy and the ascent took us two hours. We had plenty of water, but our stomachs began to growl as we made our way across the ridge to summit. Like manna from heaven, we spotted short bushes bursting with ripe blueberries. They were everywhere! More than we could possibly eat by ourselves. Over the course of a mile, we stopped countless times to fill our hand with fresh berries and pop them in our mouth all at once.

In a moment of cosmic communion, we noticed that we were not the only ones delighting in the delicious manna. A large doe crept onto the trail no more than fifteen yards ahead of us and joined the feast. It was sunny, warm but not too hot with views spanning the western Maine foothills on one side and New Hampshire's Presidential Range on the other. And for a moment, Elizabeth, the doe, and I were all fed. In spite of my own foolishness, God transformed an already beautiful hike into a uniquely special feeding moment. I could hardly orchestrate such a meal again if I tried.

As we gather at the communion table, we prepare ourselves for a meal that some of us have shared many times. Some of you might even know the liturgy well enough that you could recite yourself. Yet even if I offer the blessing without stumbling and all of you process to the front in flawless order to partake of perfectly cubed bread and juice that is just the right sweetness, these things alone would not be enough to assure Christ's presence at the table. Despite our best efforts, God blesses us in ways that are spontaneous and often too difficult to put into words. What Jesus offers us in the scripture is an invitation rather than an explanation. Eat of this bread. Drink of this cup. Experience God feeding your body and spirit.

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