

Extreme Spiritual Makeover:
“From Hunger to Satisfaction”

Mark 6:30-44

Dr. J. Howard Olds
April 2, 2006

I had a church member once who displayed a bold sign in his Laundromat. On it were these words: “Everything I enjoy is illegal, immoral, or fattening.”

Food—we have a love affair with it. It is a source of temptation and cause for celebration. We can’t get along without it. The Bible is full of it: Eve was tempted with an apple. Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of pea soup. Heaven will be like a wedding banquet prepared for a king. In our Scripture today, Jesus feeds 5,000 people with five loaves of bread and two sardines. This compelling story told in all four Gospels has a couple of phrases that I want to point out on our way to Holy Communion.

The first is a **COMMAND** given to the disciples who are concerned about a crowd at suppertime. In Verse 37 Jesus responds to them saying, “**You give them something to eat.**” *They said to him, “That would take eight months of a man’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”* Probing question. Haunting question. A compelling kind of command. Are we to go and feed the hungry?

Hunger is still a world problem. Twenty-four thousand people die from hunger every day. That’s one life every 3.6 seconds. Seventy-five percent of them are children under age five. According to the USDA, 4.4 million households in the United States suffer from hunger and that number is increasing, especially among the working poor.

People who care try to respond. UMCOR has been fighting hunger around the world since 1940. Multiple other Christian organizations and para-church organizations do the same. In 2004, 5.5 million U.S. households got food stamps and 16.9 million children got free meals at school. Is it enough? I don’t know.

I read a statistic this week that first alarmed me, then sobered me. It would only take 13 billion dollars a year to end hunger for the earth’s poorest citizens. That’s a lot of money. Then I read another statistic. Americans spend 30 billion dollars a year on diet programs and diet aids to burn, to block, to flush, and to suck out the extra fat we accumulate from overeating. Is hunger a solvable problem in the world? Well, you would think so, wouldn’t you?

Is there any grace for us gluttons? We’ve been talking about the Seven Deadly Sins during this Lenten season, among them: laziness, pride, greed, envy, lust. Gluttony is the sin that shows. Society considers greed to be good. Lust is embraced in smoky clubs and secret cyberspace. But gluttony, the need to swallow or gulp down excessive amount of food, drink, or intoxicants to the point

of waste, is a public problem. It just hangs out there for everybody to see.

The federal government reminds us that obesity is a \$100 billion dollar a year health problem. The weight loss industry promises we can lose weight while still eating all we want; we can even melt the fat away while we sleep. If only the advertisements were true. Hollywood sets the standard for appearance to be that of Sandra Bullock or Tom Cruise, leaving the leanest and most fit person in this Sanctuary feeling overweight and out of shape. Have Americans made gluttony an unpardonable sin? Is that where we have come to in this world?

There is in this story a **COMMENT** that I think is as important as the **COMMAND**. The comment is in Verse 42: "***They all ate and were satisfied.***" Is there a hunger that food will not satisfy? Jesus, tempted in the wilderness to turn stones to bread, replies to Satan: "*Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.*" The sin of gluttony is not about size, or style, not even health. It is about idolatry. It is the assumption that food will provide the comfort, the satisfaction, the acceptance that God alone can give.

Verses 39, 40: "*Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties.*" Now what is going on here? Why is it that Mark takes the time to point out this particular piece of this story? I want to break the groups down a little further.

How many times a week does your family sit down at the table for a meal at your house? A happy meal is more than a hamburger and super-sized fries at McDonalds. Is there something that happens in community that's way beyond the calories of food? Oh, I know it is a tough world out there. There's soccer, church, school, and habits. When something has to give, it's easy for the family meal to be the first to go. I just want you to think about it. What is lost when there is no family meal?

Did you hear the story about the husband who bought his wife a very special birthday present? He really wanted it to be a surprise, so he tried to find a place in the house to hide it where no one would ever look. He came up with the perfect place. He put it in the oven.

Mariam Weinstein has a book on The Surprising Power of Family Meals. In it she says that when families eat together there are fewer incidences of alcohol and drug abuse, less obesity and fewer eating disorders, children have reliable access to their parents, it provides an anchoring for everyone's day, it reminds us non-verbally of the importance of family, and it enhances a feeling of belonging. There's a lot more to family meals than just food.

"They all ate and were satisfied." What's happening here? Miracles are to be celebrated not explained! Yet, we try to explain them away. One explanation often given for this miracle focuses on sharing instead of multiplication. William Barclay says when people sat down in groups, they were moved to share their lunches with others. It was in the sharing that the miracle really happens.

Believe as you like, but never underestimate the power of community.

The leftovers: Verse 43, “*And the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish.*” There was more than enough.

Every once in a while, I get hungry for the past. I get hungry for bean soup and ham hocks. I get hungry for fried chicken like my mother used to make.

Every once in a while, I find myself singing that old gospel song—

Come home, come home, it's supper time,
The shadows lengthen fast.

Every once in a while, I long for that Prayer of Humble Access from the old Book of Common Prayer. I call it “The Crumb Prayer”:

We do not presume to come to this Thy Table, O merciful Lord,
Trusting in our own righteousness,
But in thy manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under Thy Table,
But Thou art the same Lord
Whose property is always to have mercy.

When we went from styrofoam wafers and Cokesbury Chiclets to real bread for Communion a few years ago, some of you were concerned. I got letters complaining that children were enjoying Communion too much because the bread tasted so good. Most of all, people were concerned about the crumbs that drop on the floor. Kind of makes a mess. I apologize—but not really. Every time I see those crumbs, I think about this prayer. Even the crumbs under the Table are enough grace for me! There is enough mercy in the leftovers to make me well. Where sin abounds, grace super abounds. So, we don’t come to church in the midst of scarcity, we come in the midst of plenty. There are more than enough crumbs under the Table to satisfy the hungry heart. The crumbs are enough.

That’s what the Canaanite woman said to Jesus. He told her that He came to find the lost children of Israel. But she, with a lot of need and even more faith responded “*Yes, but even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.*” Jesus said, “*Go, your daughter is healed.*”

I’m not trying to crush anybody’s self-esteem. I’m just saying, with God, there’s more than enough, more than enough love, more than enough food, more than enough grace, more than enough life, more than enough meaning to see you through. Even the crumbs under the Table are enough.

O taste and see that the Lord is good.
He satisfies the hungry heart, with gifts of finest wheat.
Come give to us O Saving Lord, the bread of life to eat.

