



The New England Church Pulpit

New England Congregational Church UCC
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SOUL FOOD

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John 6.25-34 (this passage follows the feeding of the multitude on the hillside)

When the crowd found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi when did you get here?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth: you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God has placed the seal of approval.

Then they asked him "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

So they asked him, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'"

Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is God who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is the One who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

"From now," they said, "give us this bread."

(Hindu reading)

Bhagavad-Gita 3.10-16, 19

*The Lord of Creatures formed worship,
together with mankind, and said:*

*"By worship you will always be fruitful
and your wishes will be fulfilled.*

*Beings arise from food;
food arises from rain;
rain arises from worship;
worship, from ritual action;*

*Ritual action, from God;
God, from the deathless Self.
Thus, the all-present God
requires the worship of men.*

*He who fails to keep turning
the wheel thus set in motion
has damaged the working of the world
and has wasted his life.*

*Without concern for results,
perform the necessary action;
surrendering all attachments,
accomplish life's highest good.*

Food. Something most of us enjoy, though I have friends who don't enjoy food; it is a necessary annoyance. They eat only in order to stay alive and function. I can't get my mind around that; for me, food is the essence of each day. Twisting Shakespeare a bit, from *Twelfth Night*, I like to think that if food be the music of life, we must sing on and by such music, live.

Food is more than simple physical sustenance. A meal is an event, it is ritual, and if we frame that ritual carefully, every meal will be a communion, a comfort for body, soul, mind, and spirit. It is something we very much need to sustain our body as well as our flagging spirits. And comfort foods have a place, too. Popcorn for me is a favorite comfort food; though not all that nourishing for the body, it is just the ticket for my weary soul, and paired with a movie, it becomes a spiritual banquet that revives and restores, a communion of a different sort, but a communion of great proportion all the same.

When ancient Israel was wandering through the wilderness, spirits at rock bottom, worrying about starving to death, God provided manna each morning for the people to eat. It was daily given and could not be stored up, so the people had to trust that each new dawning it would be there anew. It was the essence of physical sustenance, to be sure, but it was also a comfort food that reassured them they were cared for by God.

To provide a tangible reminder of God's faithfulness, Moses was instructed to store a small portion of the manna in a jar and place it before the Holy Ark, the altar in the tabernacle. Placed thus, it was more than just food, but a tangible reminder of God's presence, given to them at the height of their brokenness. Their time of vulnerability was fully matched by God's generosity, and the life-threatening scarcity of the wilderness was transformed into a place of wondrous abundance.

In that same tradition, bread and wine sit on our altar each month as a reminder of God's presence. This bread is more than bread; this wine is more than wine. These remind us that there is something holy in each slice of bread we toast, each meal we eat—whether alone or in the company of friends; each experience of abundance that we know in our time of emptiness, tragedy and loneliness. It becomes our soul food, our comfort food, not because it has any magic, but because it connects us to something beyond our feelings, something beyond our circumstances; something beyond what our limited human vision allows us to know at the present. It reminds us that what may be, may not be; and what may not be, may be.

In John's story, the crowd, Jesus perceives, is clamoring after him because of the miracle of the loaves and fishes they had just experienced. He accuses them of following him for what he can do for them. In reality everything he does for them is to help them see what the life would be like if God were in charge.

For some, the fish and chips on the lawn were enough. Feeding their hungry mouths was a selfish act, and all they wanted. Even knowing that, Jesus didn't refrain from giving it to them. But for others, this expansion of the small lunch opened their eyes to the abundance of life in the midst of its scarcity.

The Bhagavad-Gita gets it right when it says that human beings arise from food. Think about that for a moment. Food facilitates conversation, creates relationships, and stimulates the brain and the heart as well as the stomach. Rarely do we schedule confrontations at meals; rarely do we schedule lunch to fire someone; rarely do we prepare food with people who have been nasty to us. Meals are reserved for forward-thinking business planning, to talk to friends, to catch up with someone you haven't seen in a while, to brainstorm, to laugh, to recall to mind that life is good.

Today we come from varying backgrounds to eat together at this table. Some are men, some are women. Some are quite old others are quite young. Some are Democrats and some are Republicans and some are not sure who they are these days. Some are straight, some are gay, some are transgender. Some are healthy and some are ill. Some are financially secure; others live from paycheck to paycheck. Some are celebrating the birth of children into the family; others are grieving the death of a parent.

Most of us are here because we need something more than food for our bodies. We want to find meaning in what we do and who we are. We want to know that we're connected to something beyond the daily routine of climbing our way to the top. We want to know that if tragedy should come our way, we will survive. So we come to eat and drink together—at this table, at Coffee Fellowship, and then at the 21 or more meals we will eat this coming week—to ground us in a holy communion with God and in solidarity with one another.

A story from the World War II tells about a group of orphaned children, rescued from starvation and fear. They were ravenous at mealtime, afraid there wouldn't be any more tomorrow. They were unable to sleep at night because of the bombs and their hunger. Then someone suggested giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. It did the trick. A simple piece of bread was more than bread to the kids ravaged by the obscenities of war and the fears of the day. (Lectionary Homiletics, Volume XVII, Number 5, p. 8)

Come today to eat and drink, to pray and be prayed for, to cry or to laugh and to dream. Life is often confusing and disheartening, less than what we hoped it would be and more struggle than what we wished it were. But the food at this table is more than food, nourishing our souls to daydream about the possibilities. So we gather to partake of this soul food, where bread is more than bread and wine is inspiration for the spirit. Amen.

—Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal Spirit of Life, to whom we give lip service but do so all too often with insensitive hearts, grant us today a vital experience of your refreshing presence. Clarify our thoughts, elevate our spirits, deepen our faith, and challenge our platitudes that when we leave this place today we may lay a new claim on life for having been here.

For all that makes life rich and beautiful we thank you. We are grateful for our homes and our families, that even when we disagree or fight, we are still there for one another. We are reminded of our friends who laugh with us, friends who console us in our grief, friends who know that we're not perfect and who like us anyway, friends who accept us just as we are.

For great books that open our minds to new worlds, causing us to stretch a bit more to accommodate parts of life we would not otherwise encounter; for great music and great art that causes us to think outside of the box; for medical personnel who help us find healing and for mental health practitioners who help us find a sense of function amid our dysfunction, we give thanks. For scientists that assure us that the world is, indeed, round, and warn us with all urgency to be good caretakers of this orb on which we live, lest it be choked to death by pollution and selfishness that reveres green money over a green earth.

For those who have gone out of their way or who have risked their life or even lost it helping someone else, we stand in humble gratitude; for those who, in spite of all the evil this old world spews out, call us to dignity, to peace, to possibility, we are grateful. For those giving their lives for peace, we offer our debt of gratitude.

We lay upon the altar of hope our anxious concerns for the tumult and bloodthirstiness of the nations. The attacks in London yesterday, added to the plethora of terrorists attacks of recent years, is more than a caring heart can bear. We pray for those whose lives are upended by this tragedy, and the grief of those who lost loved ones. We pray that the leaders of the nations of the earth will be brought to wisdom and the people brought to penitence for the vast injustices that plague humanity like a wicked disease. May we realize that someone must take the higher ground, to swallow pride and extreme nationalism at the expense of other human lives. God grant us peace.

For this congregation we pray, that we may be responsible in our call to be the body of Christ. May we not fail in our mission to bring peace, to love people as they are, and to rise to the occasion that invites our service to the community, the nation, and the world. Enlarge our vision, our generosity, and our dedication that we may deserve your approval as good and faithful servants. In the spirit of the Christ of peace, Amen.

(Adapted from *A Book of Public Prayer* by Harry Emerson Fosdick)