“Filling and Fulfilling”

11 Pentecost, August 5, 2018, Year B

John 6:25-35

First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

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***27****Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God has placed the seal of approval…*

*Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry,*

*and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” – John 6:27, 35*

When we come to the Communion table, what do we see? Or, more importantly, *who* do we see?

If you’ve never imagined thinking of anyone else but yourself as you come to the table, maybe you should try this: Imagine Jesus is sitting here, right in the middle of this table, like that famous picture of the Last Supper, and all around him are people who are desperate just to be near him.

They lean in toward him, hungry for his every word. They watch his every move, as he blesses and breaks the bread and pours the wine. They thirst for these last precious moments with him before he’s arrested and taken away. They are the honored guests at the table and we are privileged to take their place today.

So, who’s here? You, me, old people, young people, poor people, rich people. Saints and sinners. Cheaters and givers. Liars and truth-tellers. The meek and the strong. Hoarder and spender. Healthy and frail. Peace-maker and law-breaker. Money-lovers and God-lovers.

Yes, humanity in all our glory and all our shame are here. *All* are included at Jesus’ table. So, why do we, in real life, dare to exclude *anyone* from the riches God’s kingdom offers to them? Who are *we* to say who’s in or who’s out?

Jesus once told a parable about workers in a vineyard:

***20****“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.****2****He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard.*

***3****“About nine in the morning he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing.****4****He told them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’****5****So they went.*

*“He went out again about noon and about three in the afternoon and did the same thing.****6****About five in the afternoon he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, ‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’*

***7****“‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.*

*“He said to them, ‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’*

***8****“When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’*

***9****“The workers who were hired about five in the afternoon came and each received a denarius.****10****So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius.****11****When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.****12****‘These who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’*

***13****“But he answered one of them, ‘I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius?****14****Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you.****15****Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’*

# *16“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (Matthew 20:1-16)*

Jesus point is that *God is exactly like the vineyard owner*. *God is generous to a fault with everyone*, regardless of how *we* feel about that person or that group of persons. In fact, God gives *preferential treatment* to those at the margins of society and to those who have trespassed. We who have regularly done the “right” thing, made the “right” choices, and lived a “proper” life already have our own reward. We don’t need anything extra and we needn’t deny another the shared riches of our society. We shouldn’t complain about anyone else being enriched by God – we got ours. “*The last will be first, and the first will be last.”* That is the true meaning of the kingdom of God. It’s a tough pill to swallow for some, but that’s God’s way.

When Jesus said *everyone* is included at the table, he means people in the straight and narrow line as well as the welfare office line, at the border line, and in the prison chow line. We may look upon these folks and judge them, but *God* doesn’t. And, if we are Christians and we want to walk in the path of Jesus, *we* shouldn’t judge them, either. All are God’s people, whether we like it or not, and all are worthy to receive the love of God.

Jesus tried to explain to us just how serious he was about God’s compassion, love, and wide open welcome. So Jesus went so far as to offer his own body as a living example of the extreme to which God would go to save us. Jesus said, *“I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”* Jesus was giving his own body as food and drink for us. Later he’ll get even more graphic with this analogy and many in his circle will begin to turn away from him. But he persisted right up until the very end of his earthly life to leave nothing to the imagination of his followers when it came to the suffering he – and they – would endure for the sake of God.

Jesus said, ***“****Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”* What was he talking about? He’s talking about running after money, social status, approval - all those things can wither and crumble in the span of a day. *Only God’s love for us endures*. The only goal to work toward is to love each other as God loves us.

Love doesn’t cost any money. Love cannot be bought. We can’t put a price tag on love. When we do that, it’s not really love – it becomes more of a hunt for a possession of sorts. Love is a lot of work. It takes a lot out of us, but can also give us everything. Love means letting go of our own striving and letting God fill our emptiness. As the Apostle Paul said, *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres, (1 Cor13:4-6).”*

When we’re confronted with choices to make, whether to include or exclude those who are different, or those we think are trying to get something for nothing, or those we look upon as unworthy, try to measure our feelings up to what Paul is saying about love. His words apply to all situations, not just ones we pick and choose. He speaks a universal truth about love – that it is God’s creation and so isn’t every single person on God’s good, green Earth.

So how can we *embody love* as Jesus embodies the Bread of Life and Cup of Blessing? How can we *embody food and drink* for everyone who hungers or thirsts for love?

Think of a time when we were hungry or thirsty for a listening ear, a comforting word, even a reassuring embrace. Was there a time when we would have appreciated compassionate attention from even a stranger? Would we have received it – or given it – equally no matter who it was asking or giving?

How is it that talk of Jesus’ Table of Plenty turns to talk of compassionate love? Because, my friends, they are one in the same thing. If we are generous enough to open this table to anyone, we should be as generous in offering ourselves as witnesses to God’s love. And to be a witness to God’s love means walking in the Way of Jesus, always with hearts full of compassion, peace, and equality for all God’s people.

So, here we are. You, me, old people, young people, poor people, rich people. Saints and sinners. Cheaters and givers. Liars and truth-tellers. The meek and the strong. Hoarder and spender. Healthy and frail. Peace-maker and law-breaker. Money-lovers and God-lovers. All of us here to share the Bread of Life and the Cup of Blessing together, as God’s flawed people, with hearts able to open wide to accept others as they are and ourselves as we are. May God bless us as we strive for that which never spoils but endures to eternal life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

References

Bartlett, David L., and Taylor, Barbara Brown, Eds., *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 308-313.

*Zondervan NIV Study Bible,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).