

Message: Real Food of Life**What do you do when you're hungry?**

Amber, a contributor to Christianity Today, says this, “Sometimes when I'm hungry, I try to take the edge off my appetite with a bag of M&M's or possibly a Snickers bar. You've heard Snickers really satisfies? Well, I've learned differently. Sugary snacks like these taste good for the moment, but they offer no nutrition, and the high amount of sugar actually *increases* your appetite.”¹ Amber isn't telling us to stop eating candy. She's telling us we can't expect to satisfy hunger with junk food.

“The same is true for spiritual hunger. Of course, we may not recognize this kind of hunger as easily. We won't be bothered by a grumbling stomach, but we might notice a grumbling attitude. We might notice that nothing in life brings us the happiness we crave. No matter how much stuff we buy or how many friends we have, we always find ourselves wanting more. Why? Because just like candy, no material possession, no relationship, no drug or drink can fill us up.”² We are spiritually hungry.

There are many kinds of spiritual hunger. For instance, we may try to fill up *our* emptiness with the wrong kind of relationships. The idea that we can look to others to fill us and make us complete is flawed, because all humans are weak. We all fail others and ourselves. Our inner being is unable to be fully satisfied by others. Another spiritual hunger is found in our efforts to satisfy desires with worldly things. We are consumers. That's the message of the world and particularly western culture. We're marketed to indirectly through our parents and directly from early childhood. That trend continues all our lives. But if all we do is consume, won't we run out of resources and compete with others for those that remain? Spirituality isn't something we can consume, even though the world tries hard to find ways to do so.

A sign of spiritual hunger is grumbling and complaining about God. The Jews complained when Jesus claimed to be more than a carpenter. We complain when our “Santa Claus God” - the God who waits on us to satisfy our every need, doesn't provide what we want (or doesn't do it fast enough). If you find yourself complaining about God, it's time for

¹ Source: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ixjf/2000/sep/oct/13.4.html>

² *Ibid*

a reality check, time to take a good hard look in the mirror at your spiritual health.

So what can satisfy our spiritual hunger? Our passage for today points us to the answer. In John 6:35 Jesus says, *“I am the bread of life. Anyone who comes to me will never go hungry, and anyone who believes in me will never be thirsty.”* That sounds great, but it’s also kind of cryptic. What does it mean? Is it really about food or drink? That’s physical hunger. Physical hunger is hunger of the body. It reminds us we need nourishment to be healthy, able to do the things we want to do.

Isaiah 55:1 offers a compelling clue about satisfying spiritual hunger, *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.”* Even in ancient Israel, people knew spiritual hunger. They also knew God was the key to meeting that hunger.

How does Jesus feed our spiritual hunger? God’s Word feeds our spirit, our soul, in the same way bread feeds our body. Our spirit needs nourishment to be healthy. Our spiritual body needs the bread of life for a strong foundation and living water to refresh and renew us each day. Spiritual bread builds up a foundation based on Christ’s love. Trust in God, obedience to God’s will, and assurance we are God’s children are the building blocks of that foundation. Our spirit is strongest when we are in communion with God and each other. We are healthiest when we are part of the body of Christ, when we depend on Christ and support each other, particularly when we have differences.

We often don't really understand what Jesus means when he says we will never go hungry and never be thirsty until we find ourselves dealing with things that hurt a lot. Through times of despair, we learn to depend on our relationship with Christ in a way we never did before. When we depend on Jesus spiritually, the words of the Bible come to us when we need them – that’s the foundation we laid by reading God’s Word. Our prayer life is like a safety net, learned through practice and discipline. Those we have cared for care for us in return; that’s what it

means to love our neighbors. These are some of the ways Jesus cares for us. There were days in the past 15 years since I was reborn, where I needed Jesus just to make it out of bed each morning. I know each of you has felt the same way. We needed the courage and vitality that comes from our spirit within us to get up and put one foot in front of the other. John 6:47 tells us what do to find courage to face each day, “*Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life.*” Believe in Jesus with all your heart and he will give you inner strength, a strong spirit.

How does Jesus meet our spiritual hunger? In John 6:51 Jesus says, “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*” Jesus feeds our hunger through the gift of his body and blood to give us eternal life. Is this some sort of “holy cannibalism,” where we have to consume Jesus’ body and blood frequently? Or will we turn into one of the living dead, some sort of zombie if we fail to take communion? Neither of those is the case.

Jesus is talking about feeding our inner being, our spirit. Keep in mind one thing: when Jesus was speaking to this predominantly Jewish crowd, there was no such thing as the Lord’s Supper or the Eucharist. While there’s a strong pointer to the sacrament of communion, Jesus was speaking at a more basic level. Jesus was telling the people that if they will come to him and believe he was sent by God, if they will believe in his message of radical, transforming love, if they will hear the blessings of living the Christian life, they will be blessed by God. By faith, they will find hope in God’s grace and love, they will find a foundation – Jesus, on which they can build a life, a life with purpose and meaning where it was empty before. That’s good news!

The good news of Jesus isn’t just a story of the past. This isn’t the story of an innocent guy who got the shaft 2,000 years ago. He’s more than a carpenter or a regular guy who got caught up with a Temple dispute. Jesus is a lot more than that and we need to tell everyone so. Jesus came from heaven, died for our sins, rose from the dead and returned to heaven. Jesus is present with us today in our times of need, our times of celebration, and every moment of every day. Jesus is here with us today in this room. Jesus will be present with us tomorrow and

Jesus will be with us for the rest of eternity. That’s something we can share with others. Faith based on our experience of God’s love can’t be denied. It calls to us, feeds us and motivates us to share the blessings we receive – faith, hope and love, with others through our life and ministry.

Jesus feeds us spiritually through preaching, teaching, service, loving others, being comforted and being healed. That’s why we have such a strong association between worship and fellowship. That’s why the early church met in homes, as some churches still do. That’s why we gather on Sunday for time together in worship, preaching, singing songs, prayer and communion. We are called to the sacraments - baptism and communion, because they are visible signs of God’s invisible, spiritual grace. We are not only called to share our faith with others, we are called to show our love of God through acts of charity and service to others. God calls us through prevenient grace.

We must be careful so that we aren’t like the crowds who followed Jesus after he fed them miraculously. Jesus knew their hearts. His words are recorded in John 6:16, *“You are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill.”* The people of Jesus’ time aren’t any different than people today. They like the quick fix for hungry bellies rather than the more fulfilling, costly bread that gives eternal life. Yet the bread of life remains essential for good spiritual health. Jesus prescribed the daily requirements when he said, *“Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God”* (Matthew 4:4).

Jesus challenges those who don’t believe: His message is hard for them to understand or stomach. He challenges those who are fed by divine grace, but who are only looking for a band aid, not a cure for the true, deadly disease that kills, sin. Jesus challenges those who seek to strip him of his divinity, making him into a poor, homeless carpenter with mental problems. C.S. Lewis is credited with posing the “trilemma”: Jesus is lunatic, liar or God. To quote Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, *“You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any*

patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

Will you eat the bread of life? We must choose to do so. We can’t “accidentally” eat it and gain eternal life. That isn’t how God’s grace works. God’s prevenient grace calls to us. Each day when we get up, we must make the same choice. Do we believe Jesus is our Lord and Savior? That’s what it means to be called by Christ and to be filled with a Holy Spirit that is making us into the image of Christ, slowly and surely, day by day.

God’s living bread and water are freely available when you’re ready. The promise that comes with them is amazing: our spirit will never hunger. That means our spirit will never break down or unhealthy when we believe Jesus is Lord. We will have a firm foundation in faith. Our spirit will be satisfied, not hungry. There’s an added benefit: our spirit will never thirst. The living water will quench our thirst forever. The living water, flowing from the throne of God is the Spirit of God flowing through us. It carries the nutrients and oxygen to all parts of body so they are energized and ready to work. This means each member of the body of Christ is alive in Christ, filled with energy and ready to work.

Let me end with a brief cooking lesson. “Have you ever made sourdough bread? It begins with a starter. Every ten days you need to feed that bread starter whether it wants to eat or not. That’s the beginning of the process for making bread. Forty-eight hours after feeding it, fresh loaves of yummy smelling bread are ready to cut and serve. I don’t know about you, but melted butter on freshly baked, warm bread is probably one of the best things I’ve ever eaten. But you know what? As good as that slice tastes, it will never compare to the true Bread of Life, the nourishment we receive from Heaven, Jesus Christ.

I hope you’ll take time to notice something about many of the people you meet this week: they’re starving spiritually, yet they’re still reaching for candy, thinking that will fill their emptiness. What they need is real food. Will you show them where to find the best bread they will ever taste?”³

³ *Ibid*

Psalm 111 (NRSV)

Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. He provides food for those who fear him; he is ever mindful of his covenant. He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations. The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever. Holy and awesome is his name. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. His praise endures forever.

John 6:51-58 (NRSV)

“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”