

Community Church of Issaquah

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The Bread of Life

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More than likely, the most common thing that people of faith have is to pray before eating. We call that saying grace. A lot of families and individuals have their own words of table blessing. Did you grow up with that repeated prayer when you were called to the table to eat? Not everyone did that, but let's be honest, many of us did. I can recall sitting at the table with family and one of us would be told to "say grace." I always quickly spoke and prayed, "God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food. Amen." With the word 'amen' we all began quickly to dig into whatever was on the table before us to eat. If we forgot to say grace, we could always use the excuse my mother told. As she would say, "Oh well, the blessing is in the eating. Let's eat."

The practice of praying before eating is, at its heart, deeply wise. It is worth slowing down and reflecting on it.

It is a fundamental sort of prayer, a prayer of gratitude for the goodness that fulfills one of our essential needs.

We need to eat. We eat daily, and sometimes more than once a day, when we have enough. Praying before receiving daily sustenance is a practice of gratitude and humility. Gratitude and humility are an awareness of being that open us to a deeper and fuller relationship with the Lord that goes beyond ourselves. This daily prayer invites us to

slow down and feel gratitude, humility, and enjoyment for our food itself.

Often, we don't give much thought to the actual food that is on our table, we simply wrap it into one prayer and then move to consume those things that we love. Are we offering thanks for the veggies or meats? Are we thankful for milk or butter or eggs or cheese and the animals who gave us that? Are we offering a blessing for all the work that went into bringing the food to our table? Are we thankful that we had enough money to purchase these foods? This isn't the focus of our prayers, but the element of food plays a very important role in our faith.

The scriptures give us a base for our faith that we sometimes take for granted. When you read or repeat the 23rd Psalm, does it have an impact on you when the words say, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows." Did you get that? God prepares a table for us. And what's on that table that we can and should be offering a blessing for? The answer to that question is a very clear.

If we track things all the way back to the times of Moses in the Old Testament, we'll begin the focus on one element of food that will play an integral part in the history of people of faith from then until now. If you remember, the Jews were in captivity in Egypt and Moses had been chosen by God to lead them out of that captivity to the Promised Land. The time for escaping that life was shortened to a few hours. Such a short time that the women who made the bread each day did not have time for the yeast to rise,

but the unleavened bread became a symbol of their deliverance from slavery. Bread. Interesting to say the least. By the way, the Feast of the Passover centers on the concept of the unleavened bread. It remains a part of the Jewish faith tradition to this day.

How, then, did this bread issue transcend into the times of Jesus? If you remember, a crowd of thousands came to the mountainside where Jesus was teaching those gathered. The day went longer than expected, those who were present had not come prepared by bringing food. One person with an individual portion of fish and bread provided the miracle of feeding the thousands. There at the center of that miracle was once again that food element called bread. Every person – man, woman and child – received the bread that Jesus had blessed and shared.

When the prodigal son returned to his father's home, a feast was prepared to celebrate his return. A table was prepared for those celebrants as well, and I assure you, bread was a part of that feast. Like most of us when we have a family gathering, there is usually some form or bread accompanying our meals. Growing up, even if the bread was only sliced sandwich bread, there was always bread.

When Jesus went to Jerusalem the last time to observe Passover with his disciples, at the center of that celebration was also bread. As we do when we celebrate communion, the bread was passed among the group and each partook of it. We don't know the full menu of the Feast of Passover, and that isn't as important as the one item that

Christ kept at the heart of his life and ministry. Bread was essential to all at that time, and it had a very significant meaning to Jesus.

Why did Jesus say, “I am the bread of life?” In truth, he wanted all to know that he was and is the essential gift of food for the soul. The connection between Christ and food is a vital part of our own world. Food is so strongly by its nature a gift, that even in our society where it seems like everything has become a transaction, food is a very common form of gift. We give and receive the gift of food easily and without always realizing that we’re participating in an ancient gift economy. Inviting friends over for dinner. Taking someone out to lunch. Sharing a snack. Hosting a potluck. Preparing meals for our own household. There at the center is that word – food.

Daily, if not weekly, we all offer and receive food as a gift. We offer and receive food as acts of love and care. When we pray over our food, we remind ourselves that food is *fundamentally* a gift, food is fundamentally an act of love and care from our Creator. How can we respond but with gratitude. It is no mistake that food was fundamental to Jesus’ ministry. He was feeding this multitude and feeding that multitude. When he stepped into a boat the fish jumped in after him. He embodied the magnetic power of our Creator’s abundance. Jesus was so deeply identified with the nature of God that he *became* food.

It is no mistake that the core ritual of our faith is to actually eat God’s incarnation. Communion is a startling ritual, when we pause to reflect on it. It is worth pausing

and reflecting on it. Just like we receive and eat and share our daily bread, so we receive and eat and digest and embody and share God on earth. God's relationship with Creation is fundamentally a self-giving gift of generosity, given without judgment or discrimination, but with abundance. Can we not take that grace – the gift of food, or as Christ says, bread -- and have it nourish us and become a part of our very spiritual life?

Jesus was very clear in his message to his disciples and to the believers. In the verses read for us today, Jesus states with clarity, "The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." The reply from the hearers? "Sir," they said, "from now on, give us this bread." Jesus replied, "I am the bread of life. The one who comes to me will never go hungry, and the one who believes in me will never be thirsty."

This kind of hunger and thirst are not those we feel if we have missed a meal or can't find something to drink. The bread of life that Jesus brings to each believer is the spiritual gift of fulfillment. When we accept Christ as our Savior, the Spirit of God feeds our hearts and souls with that bread of life that was promised. There are times, though, that we need to be reminded of the source of that fulfillment. Doubtfully, each time we take a piece of the breads we eat will we compare that to Jesus' provision of the bread of life.

It is with that same kind of understanding that we should have each time we partake in the communion ordinance. Jesus did not casually pick up the loaf of bread that he

broke into pieces and gave to those disciples. He held in his hands to new meaning of his being the Bread of Life. When he told those men, "This is my body," the entire concept of God's gift of bread for life took on new meaning. When we gather at the table of Christ to share in our own gift of the Bread of Life, there are a couple of things to keep in our minds. First, that small piece of real bread has a great deal more meaning than just one bite of bread. We are invited to the table with Jesus to partake in the Bread of Life. And second, just as we do often when we partake of meals, there must be a time of offering Grace and Thanks to God for sending his Son to be our Bread of Life.

Let us all prepare for the blessing of being fed abundantly with God's Bread of Life, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ.