

Towson Presbyterian Church

August 12, 2018

Rev. Rob Carter

John 6: 35, 41-51

“Gospel Etiquette”

Most of you know I’m a Jersey boy. And proudly so. Lived there most of my life. But what you may not know is that I’m also a bit of a Southern boy.

You see, my parents are both from the great state of Kentucky—where most of my extended family has lived. So most of my childhood vacations were spent in the Bluegrass State, visiting grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. In fact, I often thought of my grandparents’ place in Lexington, KY as my home away from home.

But that’s not all. I was born in Tennessee. Lived there until I was five. As you might imagine, it was a bit of culture shock when my brother and I suddenly found ourselves going to school in NJ. My parents say we used to practice talking to each other without our southern drawl. We didn’t like sounding so different from all the other kids.

It was bad enough having to use words that none of our friends ever used. Like “Mam and “Sir.” You see, I was allowed to lose the southern accent. My parents didn’t mind if I shortened my vowels and learned to talk at a faster rate of speech... but they weren’t about to let up on our use of proper manners. My parents made sure, we were going to grow up as proper Southern gentlemen—knowing and using all the proper forms of social etiquette.

Take this table setting, for example. As you may or may not be able to see here... we have a place setting laid out on the table.

We have a plate and a cup... clear and simple, right?

But of course, at a formal meal, you don’t eat on just a plate. If you’re having more than one course... say, soup and salad, too... the salad plate goes on top of the dinner plate... and the soup bowl would then sit atop the salad plate.

The utensils, meanwhile, are arranged according to the meal’s order of courses... so that you begin your first course with the outer most utensil...

- with the forks always on the left,
- and the knives and soup spoon always on the right.

And not just that.

- The knife’s serrated edges should always be pointing towards the plate...
- and the soup spoon always outside of the knives.

The bread plate and butter knife should be positioned just above the forks... to the top-left of the plate.

And finally... the glasses go to top right of the plate. One would be a water goblet, and another for wine, tea, or perhaps even a champagne flute.

Now again... as I was taught, this is the proper setting... outlining the proper etiquette for eating a multi-course meal.

But here's my question—it was my question to my parents who taught me these things... and really it's still my question to this day. *Who says so?* Who got to declare, once and for all, that in American culture this is the proper table setting? You know? Who have we given permission to lay down these social rules by which we dine?

But perhaps more to the point, why does it matter? I've never really understood it. Let's say you use your inside fork to eat a salad instead of an outer fork... does that make you bad? Less worthy? Less dignified?

I mean... they're just utensils, right? They're simply the means by which we eat. They're the means by which we nourish ourselves.

Does it really matter how we use them?

You know, back in Jesus' day... none of this was the case. Back then, they didn't use forks and spoons the way we do today. Do you know how they ate? With their hands, yes.

But they didn't just use their hands, either. They also ate using bread! As scholars note, While they didn't use forks or spoons the way we do, they ate with (their) hands (using) bread... "to dip into the food and bring the food from the dish to the mouth..."¹

You see... bread was essentially their utensil. Bread was not just their primary food, but also the means by which they consumed almost all of their nourishment.

So, as Joel began exploring last week and we continue exploring this week... there's more than meets the eye when Jesus calls himself the bread of life... saying he's the bread of heaven that comes down to bring life to the world.

As Joel emphasized last week... it's confusing language... in part because we cognitively understand we don't actually eat or consume Jesus, right? But more than that, we need to think beyond our 21st western culture and hear Jesus words as they were originally intended.

For in *our* culture, "bread is often served at meals, but it's usually served as merely an option. (In fact,) many who are watching their diets choose to forgo bread altogether. (So) when we hear that Jesus is the bread of life, we can too easily think in terms of... something that's as optional as a dinner roll."²

But because the diet and the very way of eating in ancient Mesopotamia was so different, the crowds around him understood his words differently. For them, Jesus calling himself the bread of life was nothing less than Jesus saying, not only am I the nourishment you need for life, but I am the very means by which you are to see, and find, and live your life.

I am both the nourishment you need to live... and the means by which you get that nourishment.

Not surprisingly, this was a difficult metaphor for a lot of his contemporaries to accept. They said stuff like, "Wait a minute now... isn't this Jesus talking here... Joseph's son? Isn't this the same guy who, as a kid, played ball with my Josiah? Isn't this the same kid who I caught goofing off in the market? Didn't we watch as his beard filled in and his voice grew low? We know where Jesus is from,"

¹ David W. Hull in Homiletical Perspective on John 6: 41-51 in *Feasting on the Gospels: John, Volume 1*, edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015) 197.

² Ibid.

they said. “So how in the world can he say he’s the bread of life come down from heaven when we know, for a fact, he came out of Nazareth for crying out loud.”

And they were right! Everything they said was true. Jesus was from Nazareth. They had seen him grow up. And even though he could do amazing things that amazed them all... like heal the sick and raise the dead... why should they—or we, for that matter—believe that he is not only the food that endures... but that he is the very bread of life... the means by which we are to see, and find, and live our lives?

It’s a complicated metaphor to say the least... with significant ramifications if we take Jesus seriously.

For in calling himself the bread of life... the food that endures... in saying that everything else perishes except for his way, his truth, his gifts... Jesus is asking us to fundamentally *reconsider* our relationship with him, as well as our relationship with the world around us.

Jesus is asking us to reconsider the nourishment we seek. Seriously. What nourishment do we seek... for our bodies? Our minds? Our spirits? Do we seek what this world says we should seek, or are we seeking the way and will of Christ?

As we lead our daily lives... Do we confuse our need for love and grace and security with hunger for things that prove not to satisfy? Is our failure to nourish ourselves with grace why we grow insecure... and needlessly beat ourselves up... or needlessly put down others in order to lift ourselves up? Is our reluctance to nourish ourselves with God’s all-embracing love why we so easily succumb to fear... and fall prey to the temptation to hunker down and draw dividing lines rather than reaching out and growing community? Is our failure to nourish ourselves with the food that endures why we prove so reluctant to nourish others? Is that why we tacitly accept living in a world filled with so much need?

Well, if you’re at all like me, you’re probably used to consuming a diet that treats the bread of life more like a dinner roll than the main course. If you’re at all like me, you probably do use this world’s tools to navigate your way through life, rather than the lens of Jesus’ love. Just as you probably think this world’s utensils are the means by which we nourish ourselves, rather than Jesus’ love and grace.

But what if... what if we actually do start seeing and treating Jesus like the bread of life he says he is? What if we were to start putting all the superfluous stuff away? What if we put this world’s rules and this world’s rubrics aside? And instead, what if we start living according to a different way... with different rules... as we seek a different kind of nourishment—the kind only Jesus can give?

- What if we were to say we don’t need to live by the standards of this world... but by the standards of Jesus’ grace... and his grace alone?
- What if we were to say we don’t need to consume more than we need, but trust in God’s economy of grace that always has enough for everyone.
- What if we were to commit to a diet not just low on what we don’t need, but full of what we do need. Like a diet of love and grace. A diet that leads to joyful generosity, sacrificial service, and a peace that passes understanding?

What if we did all that? If we did, then I suspect what we’d find is what Jesus has always intended for us. A plate with a loaf of bread... and a cup filled with wine. And the presence of God... loving us... claiming us... redeeming us... blessing us with gifts and the opportunity to find fullness of life as we live these gifts out. For in the end, this is all we need. Love and grace to fill us. Love and grace to use us. Love and grace to guide our way. Love and grace to live each and every day. Amen.