



“Where Do I Belong”

Pastor Lew Hinshaw

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Scripture (NRSV):

John 6:24-35

²⁴ So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus.

²⁵ When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” ²⁶ Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. ²⁷ Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal.” ²⁸ Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” ²⁹ Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” ³⁰ So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing?”

³¹ Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” ³² Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.

³³ For the bread of God is that which [\[a\]](#) comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

³⁴ They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

³⁵ Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

Sermon:

I have some bad news and some good news. First the bad news: I'm going to try to bring an up-to-date spiritual message for us out of this Gospel reading from long ago and I'm not sure exactly how long that will take. The good news? It's a message about picnics . . . and we're going to have a picnic when the service is over! Yay!

What's not to like about a picnic? It's summer . . . picnic time. We'll be done with worship about noon . . . feeding time. It all seems to fit rather nicely, huh.

Three things stand out about picnics, two if you don't count the ants! Number one is the food and number two is the people. Picnics are about the really good stuff . . . you know . . . one of grandma's or mom's or dad's best dishes. For me . . . my mom's Waldorf Salad and my former mother-in-law's baked beans. Some of you fill in the blanks for us:

_____ (person's) _____ (their best dish) _____ is so good _____ (fill in the blank)

And then there's the people. Picnic is a family affair. Everybody is there who can be there. Remember how at indoor family dinners, there was often a "kid's table"? It wasn't that we didn't belong at the big folks' table. It was just a matter of space. We kids kinda liked having our own table where the level of manners could be a little lower! But at a picnic . . . everybody sat together . . . on the ground on blankets . . . or at big picnic tables, even us kids! The scene more clearly showed everybody belonged.

Food . . . and people. They go together. They belong together. When you share a meal, you have a place. You belong. Everyone gets fed and filled . . . and all of you gets fed and filled.

That's exactly what the Gospel reading is all about . . . food and people . . . and how and why Jesus brings them together. This dialogue between Jesus and the crowd is part of the story of Jesus's feeding the 5,000. It's about heavenly bread, but it is not a Last Supper story. Like the Last Supper, the Jewish religious leaders and Jesus's own disciples also get into the act.

So in the reading, Jesus is being up front with the crowd. Aren't you pursuing me mainly because you are hungry? OK. We had a picnic. I fed you bread and fish. So far, so good. You didn't break out in a food riot! [Whew!] But there's more to this picnic than bread and fish. I tell you this, Jesus said, when you eat food for your body, God wants you to know that your

souls need to be fed, also. Even if you're full on the inside, you can still be empty on the inside.

You can just hear the gasps of curiosity, the whispers of skepticism the scoffing among the crowd. Food for our souls? What kinda food is that? And Jesus said, "I am the food for your souls . . . the bread come down from heaven that gives life to the world. I am the bread of life."

These were needy people, even desperate . . . just like today, ungodly numbers of people living on the edge. Jesus went among the towns to offer his teaching and healing. Some of the people he met at least had the basic necessities of life . . . and a place to belong. The crowds in the wilderness had little to nothing . . . including the nagging feeling of not belonging. They had been pushed to the margins. Unwanted. Shunned. Untouchable. Unclean. Sinners. Poor. Not only did they have nothing, they were seen as nothing, as nobodies, less than human. Nowhere to go so they wandered in the countryside or came out of the towns where they slept in the gutters and begged on the street corners. For them life was no picnic. JESUS. GAVE. THEM. A. PICNIC.

AND JESUS WAS FOOD FOR THEIR SOULS! **Why?** Because he was fully human. His soul was full! He knew he belonged wherever he was . . . he was at home in . . . Galilee, etc., . . . because he belonged to his Abba. This "food" . . . "knowing he belonged" . . . was what Jesus most wanted to give to the world and to each person. AND JESUS WAS FOOD FOR THEIR SOULS! **How?** At the picnic, the crowd was treated like honored guests. The disciples *served* them! The remarkable, miraculous thing about Jesus was not that he could feed 5,000 with 5 loaves and 2 fish. Don't we worry ourselves silly over the how? Rather that he could give them the feeling of belonging. And by recognizing people throughout his ministry . . . by talking with them and touching them . . . singly and by the thousands. By blessing them [Luke: "Blessed are you poor."] He gave them the respect and dignity that belongs inherently to all God's creatures non-human and human.

Maslow's pyramid scheme! [Not Ponzi, but human nature.] Human needs: physiological; safety; love and belonging; esteem; self-actualization (not self-aggrandizement)]. Our hungers. The higher on the pyramid, the deeper in our souls. Even if I cannot put that hunger into words . . . I feel it. It's here in my gut. It nags at me. I turn instinctively to what seems likely to fill this empty, hungry place inside me. [Yes, there is a lot of spiritual "junk

food” out there, too!] The food that feeds this deeper hunger for belonging is a person or persons, someone or some ones to belong to and with. This is basic to being fully human, to living life that is really life . . . to know that I belong, that I matter. That’s why Jesus sat at table . . . or on the grass . . . and ate with all kinds of people.

So . . . Jesus’s picnic unfolded pretty much like my family picnics did [and do]. Feed the body . . . mom’s Waldorf Salad . . . and then feed the deeper hungers, feed the soul. This happened with the conversation that always accompanied and followed the meal . . . in our family it was talking politics and religion. And it isn’t the political or religious views that nourish. It is having the respect of being recognized and heard by others around the table that feeds the soul. When the soul is hungry, it will follow whatever holds out the promise of nourishment. THE CROWD FOLLOWED JESUS BECAUSE HE FED THEM . . . BODY AND SOUL!

This Jesus story also has some sadness, as does almost any human story. In the Gospel the sadness is that we find that Jesus’s soul food is hard to eat. The religious leaders were offended and complained to each other about this renegade rabbi, Jesus. Some of Jesus’s followers complained about his teaching saying it was too hard. Some of his followers even turned and went their own way. Why? Was it the language of eating flesh and blood? [Most of the religious leaders or the crowd wouldn’t recognize a metaphor if it walked up and slapped them in the face.] Was it Jesus’ seeming to make himself God’s equal? What?

My sense is that people were offended and put off because filling the soul . . . growing into fullness as a human being is difficult. A lot of hard work is involved. You’ve heard that saying . . . “I keep getting older but I refuse to grow up.” There’s a part of us that wants the soul food and a part of us that doesn’t. So what’s so hard about it? If Jesus is the example, then the hard part is affirming the full, God-given human value to others that one wants for oneself. The most complete way to know that I matter is to make sure that all others matter. That fullest way to experience my own “belonging” is to give everyone else an equal place at life’s table. When the scriptures say that “Jesus went about doing good,” that’s what is meant. Jesus went about offering the same God-given uniqueness that he claimed for himself. That’s what is hard. That is what turned some away from following him . . . and still does.

Those who understand this best are always those on life's margins. Those who resist are always those who are most privileged with having place, status, affluence, influence. Jesus told his disciples to give the crowd a picnic. Sit them down [recline like normal people] and give them food. Let them go back to the salad bar as many times as they want. There's plenty! Give them the privilege of leftovers! Then they will know they belong!

How does this Jesus picnic story end? With a reprise. Jesus is servant and Peter, et. al. are the honored guests. It ends with Jesus as a servant fixing a breakfast picnic on the beach for Peter and several others the honored guests. Filled with guilt, Peter had pulled himself out of the family of Jesus's followers. He lost the feeling of belonging. He was stuck. Jesus brings Peter back into the family. He re-belonging him by forgiving him. And Jesus says, "Feed my sheep."

That is today's spiritual message. Like with Peter, Jesus says to us that we are now the food of life . . . we are now the bread of God come from heaven. We are now to go forth among the crowds of our day . . . the marginalized, the hungry of spirit . . . with the words of life . . . words of affirmation, of recognition, of valuing . . . with the healing touch . . . and with this good news: **GOD DOES NOT UN-BELONG HUMAN BEINGS.** Whoever you are, you matter. Whoever you are, you belong. The Gospel shows us that when we grow up enough to take the role of servant and make places for others of God's children . . . every human meal is the reprise of God's promise . . . **I WILL NEVER UN-BELONG YOU! AMEN!**