

“The Bread of Life”

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According to Matthew Jesus said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Hmm. I guess we have to think about that a little bit.

You know when I grew up and got married I inherited my mother’s cookbook. I still have it and I still refer to it. It has hand written notes in the margin. I am not a particularly good cook. When the children were growing up, I had some pretty standard recipes I used all the time. At least once a week we ate macaroni and cheese, not out of the box, we made it from scratch back then. Still when you eat it once or twice a week, it gets a little tiring... I made spaghetti, I made pork chops, I made a lot of baked potatoes, and well you get the idea. I wouldn’t say I was a great cook.

However, when we were having company, I liked to do something special. I would get out my mother’s old cook book and look for some of the recipes she had used. My mother was a great cook. I wanted to use some of her recipes, but it was quite frustrating. On the side of a recipe she had scratched out how many cups of flour the recipe called for, and on the margin had written, “one bowl of flour.” Once when I was younger I asked, “Mother, how much is one bowl?” “Oh,” she said, “You have to use that blue bowl; that blue bowl I kept over the sink.” “Can I have the blue bowl?” I asked hopefully. “Oh I gave it to your older sister. She has it.” Hmm. I was stumped.

I remember we always had delicious mashed potatoes and gravy. I went to Mother's book to see how she made the gravy. She wrote in the margin, "add a few teaspoons of water and stir until smooth." I remember asking, "Mother, I used the measuring spoon and I put in three teaspoons, the gravy never got smooth, how much is three teaspoons?" "Oh, I meant that big tablespoon that is dented that I keep in the left hand drawer." "I suppose you gave that to Betty, too?" I asked. "No, no, I don't know what happened to it," Mother assured me. "Any old big spoon will do, besides it was your Aunt Eva who was in charge of gravy, she always just kept adding milk until it was smooth." Hmmm, Aunt Eva has been in her grave lo these many years.

Mother was a great cook, Aunt Eva could make wonderful gravy, and they may or may not have used a cook book. The cook book was just a reference. But it was only that, a reference, a loose structure. It is a ball park in which my mother could play freely. She could add things to the recipe that were not called for, she could use substitutes, or she could delete something if she wanted to. Mother used the basic rules of cookery that she was familiar with through long experience. But she interprets; sniffs, improvises, using her good sense, her creative intuition, her taste buds and her instinct for good food. She used the rules; she just worked freely and creatively within them, like an artist.

When I follow the cook book exactly, it has the exact right amount of ingredient for everything called for in the recipe. It tastes like food, but it never tastes absolutely delicious, like my mother's cooking.

Now Matthew especially presents the scribe and Pharisees as people who follow the directions to the letter. They always used the called for ingredients and they measure

everything exactly. Their piety was kind of like my cooking, edible, but not a memorable experience.

Now Jesus, there was a man who was a cook. One Sabbath he was in the synagogue and a man there with a crippled leg called out, heal me Jesus, please heal me. And Jesus did. The Pharisees said, “Hey, you broke the rule! You ignored directions. The Law of Moses, our cookbook says, “No working on the Sabbath.” They were recipe followers. Jesus said, “Well just look at the result, the man who was crippled can now walk.” Isn’t that an absolutely delicious dish to be served on the Sabbath?

As followers of Jesus, we are supposed to be good cooks, just like Jesus. As Jesus’ disciples we are supposed to offer nourishment to everyone near and far. Jesus, you are the light of the world, make your light shine. He wants us to be something other than textbook or cookbook followers. He wants us to learn how to be apprentice cooks, learning directly how to feed others from the master chef himself: Jesus.

We do have a set of instructions; of course, we use church traditions and church writings. We have our Methodist book of Discipline and our Social doctrines. They are the ballpark in which we play and work and live. Somebody might say well the bible is our cook book. I wouldn’t take the analogy that far though. The bible is a living thing; it’s not just ink marks on papers between covers of a book. We are doing more than following a recipe when we approach the bible. We use our logic and experience and reason to interpret and understand all the different people who wrote the bible over a thousand year span.

“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus says in Matthew. I wish he hadn’t said that.

It's so easy to get the wrong idea. I sometime get hung up on the word righteous. I sometimes can get concerned if I am doing the right thing. Am I doing right? I don't like to be wrong. I don't like to have to say, "Oh I'm sorry I forgot. Oh, I'm sorry I forgot to take the offering again. Oh I'm sorry, did I leave the office unlocked?" Well that is not fun. It can tie a person in knots. I'd rather say, "Gee, I wasn't the last person who left the office, someone else must have forgotten to lock up." Oh I didn't forget to take the offering; the ushers weren't there where they were supposed to be." It's so much easier to try and justify myself. Then I can pretend I wasn't wrong. You know sometimes we can just be afraid of being wrong and we can fall in love with being right. We can come to love being right more than we love God. When we do that we are a recipe follower, not a nourishing cook.

Henri Nouwen says that we are sometimes afraid to see ourselves truthfully. People who know us and love us, see us as a child of God and they are willing to overlook our mistakes. You have to start seeing yourself as your loving friends see you. As long as you are afraid of making mistakes, afraid of being wrong, afraid of being unloved, you remain blind to your own truth. You don't realize because you are a child of God you have everything you need to offer others nourishing love.

You can't force things however; you cannot make yourself see yourself as loving. You have to acknowledge where you are and affirm that place. You have to acknowledge that you are still an apprentice cook. We need to be able to fearlessly claim our own mistakes, we need to be able to stop trying to justify ourselves and accept that even though we have made some mistakes, our friends and family still love us, still see us as righteous and still see us as children of God. Then we have to trust that God will keep

giving us the people and the good cooks to show us the way to full incarnation. We can trust the depth of God's presence within us and live from there. This is the way we keep moving all our lives to be a Christ-like child of God.

Christ himself said in the beatitudes, "Blessed are you who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for you shall be satisfied." I think it is rather striking that Jesus uses words about food and drink to describe living in God's kingdom. If we are hungry for God, hungry for the good things of God, hungry for God's right way to live, then God will help us find the right way. God will come to our assistance. God will guide us as we become nourishing cooks in this life, not just recipe followers.

The central meal of our faith is when we eat together at the communion table. "Take, eat," Jesus said, "do this in remembrance of me." We need no longer be so fearful of making mistakes or worrying whether or not we are doing things the right way. Jesus is here to guide us into living the love as the children of God.