

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
An Open-Spirited Community of Faith and Action



Thou Preparest a Table Before Me...

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Larry Moffet, Pastor AUGUST 5, 2012

If Jesus is the Bread of Life we are called to feed his lambs, his sheep.

There are all kinds of ways we can be a part of the life of Christ, who invites us to come to him as the Bread of Life and then share that bread/life with others.

First let me say actual bread, physical food, makes a huge difference in lives. Food brings people together. Eating together makes us one with each other. It rests our minds from the immediate struggle to survive. It lets us focus on other things that matter.

I believe the reason our Weekly Tutoring program is a success is because it physically feeds Middle School-age boys whose

families were refugees. Some would go hungry if we didn't feed them. So first we feed them physically.

With the help of **Angelo Stabler** and all the Tutors from NWU and UNL we offer another kind of bread of survival. The young men see that people care about them. They see they are a part of something bigger than themselves. They learn things. Then they focus on what is important in life.

A story in the local newspaper this Tuesday reminded me just how important it is to meet young people at the point of their need.

A young man who came to Lincoln as part of a refugee opened a photo gallery Friday night. His name is **Wesaam al-Badry**. His story is inspiring.

His mother, his brothers and sisters and he fled Iraq. Twice. The first time her husband found them in a refugee camp and made her return to Iraq. She escaped again with all her children. After years in a refugee camp the family won the refugee resettlement lottery and came to Lincoln.

Wesaam says that in the refugee camp he became good at fighting to survive.

He arrived in Lincoln with that fighting mentality. "I was a handful," he said.

He did not trust the peace or the education here. Everything was a potential threat. He fought. He was expelled from school. He was in trouble with the law.

Three years ago something happened. He remembered bartering marbles in the refugee camp for a camera with no film. He remembered being curious how cameras worked. He saw that there was a class in photography in SECC. He signed up for it and loved it. He took more classes.

In class last spring he had the idea of taking portraits of women who had come to Lincoln as refugees. His teacher encouraged him. He asked women to bring one thing they carried with them through their years in refugee camps. He didn't want photos of tragedy and despair. He asked the women to stand as they wanted the world to see them. "I wanted to capture what I saw in these women: strength, resiliency, and the ability to overcome," he said.

The photographs are powerful. I went to opening night. Coleen beat me there. I saw people I know from all over Lincoln who came because they were inspired by Wasaam's story. Wasaam was ecstatic. "I needed to do something that was useful," he told me.

Let me re-frame Wasaam's story in the language of the Gospel today, The Bread of Life first was physical bread, physical survival for hungry people.

Just before today's Gospel Scripture passage, Jesus fed thousands from a few loaves and fishes. Today's Gospel opens with the people following Jesus looking for bread and also full of emotional and spiritual hungers.

Like Wasaam, the people in Jesus' day found out physical bread wasn't enough. We all need meaning. We all need to be a part of something useful.

Our Backpack program at Huntington School is not just a nice thing to do. It's the start of something huge in some kids' lives. Every week they see us there. They ask us questions. It all happens so fast. They are out the door with a bag. It is the first part of the Bread of Life. More than physical food goes home in those Backpacks. The children get the message someone wants them to thrive. We can't stop with Backpacks though. As followers of the Bread of Life, the Source of Meaning, we have to, with Jesus, take the next step in meeting these children at the point of their need.

The second step might be a Community Garden where children help community people plant and grow their own food. That might lead to a career as a botanist, a landscape designer, or a chef. Who knows?

I hope you see new ways the Bread of Life is engaging you spiritually, emotionally as we talk about these hands-on ways to work for Mission and Justice.

The Bread of Life starts working with those Middle-School-age boys from refugee families in our Tutoring Program through the food you bring, the lights you pay for, the smiles and the safety we provide.

The Bread of Life becomes **the bread that will never let you become hungry** when those boys realize that the one in charge has walked the path they now walk. Every week when Angelo gives his Tough Love speech, every noisy, squirmy boy focuses on Angelo's every word. It is as if the Voice of God is speaking: "Your parents don't know what you have to deal with. You will have to figure out some things on your own. If you go the way of drugs you will die or go to jail. It's that simple. Let me tell you about my friends when I was your age. Every one of them is in prison, or lives on the streets. Or dead. All but one, the one who helps me—Ishma. Is that the life you want? You can get an education. You can get a good job. You can have a good life. You have to work for it. The 23rd Psalm says it best:

You prepare a table for me ... in the presence of my enemies."

The goodness of Christ makes real food, real life, real survival possible.

Like the crowds, that is not enough. They wanted him to promise he would give them loaves and fishes every day. He points them and us to a deeper understanding. For most of us the enemies that Christ's bountiful table is in the midst of are not people. They are fears. They are doubts that we are doing anything meaningful.

They are distractions. Self-doubts. They are the fights we have with ourselves and our hopes and our dreams.

Jesus sets a table in the midst of all those enemies saying,

³⁵“I am the bread of life.

**Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”**

Christ offers us real food. We share potlucks and Bible School meals, and the cookies of fellowship with each other because all food comes from God.

Then Christ takes us deeper. He points us to ways we can in the words of Wesaam, “be useful,” and “have meaning.”

When you come to this table today I invite you to look at how Jesus feeds your soul. You look at how you are offering that Bread of Life to other people.

Your reponse proves that you understand how the Bread of Life works:

No matter what your hungers are, God will provide.

Taste and see, the goodness of the Lord is here.

God prepares a table...in the presences of all our fears and distractions.

"A messy kitchen is a happy kitchen and this kitchen is delirious."

"If we are what we eat, then I'm easy, fast, and cheap."

"My next house will have no kitchen, just vending machines."

"A balanced diet is a cookie in each hand."

Let's go back to the day when people depended on bread to survive. Some of us have cut out a lot of bread items from some meals as a way to focus on fresh fruits and vegetables and eat less starch.

Some of us really love the taste of fresh bread. It's a luxury. It's a treat. Others around the world depend on pita, or tortillas to survive. Some use rice. Some use yams.

T. S. Eliot talked about "spiritual awareness." He said many persons aspire to become Christians and believe, presumably, in the Christian faith, but never reach the stage of actually experiencing it. Aspiring towards real belief, i.e., becoming truly Christian, is one thing, whereas complete awareness of it is another.

Jesus invites us into the story. First he feeds thousands of people. Their hunger was real, just as hunger is real now to millions of the world's people.

Then after they were fed, they followed him, because they knew they would be hungry and Jesus tells them and us to look for what really matters in life.

In English, the word “bread” is sometimes synonymous with food. In many East Asian languages the word for “rice” and the word for “food” are the same. In some Melanesian languages, the same applies to yams.

“Bread” is the bottom line. It is the basic thing we need to survive. But the word – the concept – the metaphor isn't limited to food for our bellies. All those words, bread, rice, yams, also refer to the emotional and spiritual food we need to keep us alive.

A deep spiritual hunger is implanted in every human heart. Different people will seek to fill this need in different ways, but the hunger is not unique. People yearn for a deeper connection, an eternal spiritual connection, and when that is lacking will seek any means to be fulfilled.

Jesus said he came that we might have life and that abundantly. Yet, he who offered fullness of joy was often met by people with simpler, lesser needs.

EPISTLE SCRIPTURE EPHESIANS 4:1-15

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,
²with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love,
³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

**⁴There is one body and one Spirit,
just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,**

⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
⁶one God and Parent of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

⁷Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸Therefore it is said, "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people..."

¹⁰He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.

¹¹The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists,
some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry,

for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until all of us come to the unity of the faith

and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. ¹⁴We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro, blown about by every wind of doctrine,

by people's mind games, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming.

**¹⁵But speaking the truth in love,
we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.**

*** GOSPEL JOHN 6:24-35**

²⁵When the crowd found Jesus on the other side of Lake Galilee, they said to him, "Teacher, when did you come here?" ²⁶Jesus 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.

²⁷Do 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 our Parent has set his seal."

²⁸Then they said to him, "What must we do to perform the works of God?"

²⁹Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent."

³⁰So 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?"

³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.' "

³²Then Jesus said to them,

"Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven,

but it is our Abba God who gives you the true bread from heaven.

³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

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

**³⁵Jesus 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."**