



## *“The Bread of Heaven”*

Ephesians 4:1-6; John 6:34-35

Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

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Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

A remarkable spiritual revolution is changing contemporary religion. That this revolution is largely an American phenomenon makes it no less remarkable.

After nearly a century of dire predictions that religion would wither and die in the face of modern secularism, a strange thing happened. In our time we are witnessing a growing interest in what is now called “spirituality.” It seems our generation has rediscovered that we are spiritual beings and our souls need nurture and nourishing.

The religious vocabulary now features the word “spirituality.” Spirituality is often seen as in opposition to what is termed “religion.” In a recent poll, for example, 24% of Americans said they were “spiritual but not religious.”

This new vocabulary defines religion as organized religion, or traditional institutional forms of religion like churches and denominations. Often (usually?) in this conversation, “religion” is viewed negatively and spirituality is favored. I suspect the new “spirituality” is a combination of radical American individualism plus leftover elements of the revolt against organized religion from back in the ‘60s.

I recently received an invitation to a clergy retreat to be held in October on Cape Cod. The retreat will focus on “spirituality” in pastoral care along with the “spirituality” of the pastors doing the care. That is language I never heard a decade or two ago. Something new is at work in our culture.

Meanwhile, organized religion continues to be organized and institutional. At the least, the churches are holding their own. If polls can be believed, roughly 40% of Americans participate in churches, synagogues or mosques. That percentage has been the same for a generation.

If you allow that organized forms of religion are, in fact, forms of spirituality – and in the churches we talk about spirituality a lot – and you add those who are spiritual but not religious, the predictions of the withering and death of faith seem quite premature. We are spiritual beings and our souls need food.

The problem with organized forms of spirituality and faith is that forms always get in the way of reality. When humans organize any movement of the spirit, there is always a corresponding loss of the reality that created the movement and an inevitable loss of spiritual vitality. We end up going through the motions, creating legalisms and rules that crush the human spirit, while we give attention to the forms and details and forget matters of the spirit.

Ironically for Christians, that was precisely Jesus’ point in the spiritual revolution he began long ago. He taught persistently that the heart is always the issue, not the rules

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and forms. He never tired of saying that forms are means, not ends. He centered all his teaching on the commandment to love God and neighbor. He founded a movement that is essentially relational.

So given human nature – we are spiritual beings and we tend to overpower matters of the spirit with our organized forms – how can Christians avoid the dangers and perils inherent in institutional religion? Or, how can you and I keep our souls alive and growing and maintain vital spirituality in our congregation? Can we retain the character of Jesus' life and teaching in our community?

These are no small questions and it does no good to deny the problem. In fact, we are hopeless if we do not confess that we and the church are guilty as charged. Over the centuries the church has domesticated the spiritual dynamic unleashed in the Christian gospel. The internal dynamic of much church life damages the people in the pews and their leaders. Our structures always tend to frustrate our mission. We neutralize God's power by our devotion to forms. And, tragically, the church has a habit of aligning itself to oppressive powers. We have been in the wrong side of too many social issues too many times. Slavery, racism, war, gender discrimination: large sectors of the church supported (and in some cases continue to support) them all. Then of course, there is the corruption that afflicts leaders in the church that embarrasses us and drags God's name in the dirt.

A sad reality is that being on the inside of church life is a spiritually draining experience – and it shouldn't be. The Bishop of London was once asked by a woman how she might promote her spirituality. He answered, "Read the Bible, pray, and stay out of church politics."

I must confess the only reason I have survived nearly four decades on the inside of the church is that I am irrevocably committed to Jesus Christ. He died for the church, and he called me to serve his people. And along the way I've seen enough flashes of brilliance in the lives of people and congregations to give me hope and keep me going. But it isn't easy – it can't be.

Our texts for today address the problem of the church and spirituality and point to a way beyond life in the ordinary. John 6 is Jesus' commentary on his feeding of the multitude. His point is that the miracle pointed at an inner meaning – the feeding of the soul. There's more to life than meets the eye, he said. And, there is more to religion than usually meets the eye. We have souls, and those souls need food. Not just any food will do.

The food that satisfies the soul is food that God gives. God offers spiritual life and abundance to all who receive the offer to feed at God's table. "Come to me," Jesus added, "and I will take you to God's table and feed your soul." God's life can become part of our lives – if we believe it.

Jesus' offer of spiritual food is as old as the Christian movement. Over the centuries, in spite of all its difficulties, Christianity has developed a deep and rich spirituality based on Jesus' offer. Sadly, we Protestants seldom take the time to discover the depth of our own traditions, let alone learn from the larger Christian tradition.

Peter Gomes is the Minister of Memorial Church at Harvard and teaches at Harvard Divinity School. Peter is a wise and learned man. Once I was with him when he lectured to a seminary. During the question and answer time, a student asked him the inevitable question of our time, "What have you learned from other religious traditions to assist in your life and ministry?"

Peter paused and then said, "There are riches and depth to my own tradition I have not yet begun to fathom. I must learn my own tradition before I venture out into others."

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Christian spirituality is ancient, deep and quite specific. Our spirituality begins with primary allegiance to Jesus Christ. It is centered in his life and teaching, which we believe is revelation from God. Christian spirituality has a specific purpose: our transformation from what we are to what God designed us to be. St. Paul calls it “the fullness of the stature of Christ.”

I will say without hesitation that if there were more people in the church and in the world who acted like Jesus and embodied his teaching, the world and the church would be better places.

The Epistle Lesson, Ephesians 4, describes the process of Christian spirituality. Our spirituality is no ordinary spirituality. It is inherently communal – it happens in and by communities of faith. The logic of the text is clear: Christ gives gifts to the church and each of us has a gift. Some teach, others offer mercy, lead, discern God’s will, or manage the affairs of the congregation.

All these gifts working together create ministry in the community and, in the process, build the congregation up. Imagine a congregation deeply committed to building up each person in the community! What if our organizational life, our conversations, our social lives intentionally build up the people of the community?

The process works, the lesson continues, through love. And love always builds, always nourishes souls, always heals relationships and persons.

But you have to want this spirituality. It’s not automatic. And you need to submit to the process of spiritual formation in the community. Spirituality, at least the Christian variety, does not grow in isolated souls. It grows in relationships in communities.

Speaking of Peter Gomes, when I was in Boston, the downtown clergy decided to hold a prayer service for victims of the AIDS virus and their loved ones. It was back when AIDS was an epidemic and there were no cures and no way to slow it down.

The service was held at Trinity Church, Copley Square, a sanctuary that seats well over 1,000 people. The place was packed with what appeared to be mostly parents of victims of AIDS. Several clergy, including Professor Gomes, led the service. At the end, he invited any and all who desired healing to come to the front for prayer.

I’m still not sure why but I made my way to the front. At the time I didn’t know anyone with AIDS. I somehow felt that I needed prayer and healing. I knelt at the altar rail and waited. Now I need to tell you, kneeling isn’t my normal form of devotion. I grew up Baptist and, like Congregationalists, Baptists are far too proud to kneel.

But I knelt – and it was good for me! I peeked up to see who would bless me and it was Peter. He smiled, winked, put his hand on my head, and prayed for my healing.

I didn’t see visions or have any form of spiritual ecstasy, but I experienced something perhaps more important. In a physical act, I submitted myself to the Christian Church and its process for spiritual formation. I’ve never been the same.

Nothing in the world is more practical than Christian spirituality. It is essentially relational. It is about being a spouse, a parent, a child, a worker, a manager, a neighbor, a church member. Christian spirituality transforms all of life into what God intends life to be.

I heard from an old church member last week. Marie was and is a delightful Christian woman. She and her husband Lee were important parts of our lives. I looked up to and learned from them both. They were filled with mercy and were generously hospitable loving people with an essential humility that endeared them to all.

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Marie was a farmer. Their farm was small and in an area blessed by soil and weather to produce wonderful fruit: apricots, peaches, apples, cherries and in the early spring, the best asparagus I've ever eaten. Lee owned and operated a large equipment company. Together they were quite a pair. Lee let our children play on his trucks and equipment. He even took our daughter to work with him. She rode in his "stinky" truck all day, ate a bag lunch at the construction site, and thoroughly enjoyed it.

During the summer, we often discovered grocery bags of fruit on our front porch. And in the growing season, they moved from their town house down to an old house on the farm. I recall sitting there with sunbeams shining through cracks in the walls and dust motes dancing in the light while we ate good fruit and the kids played on the floor.

I was deeply affected by them and learned much from them. Marie is 88 years old now, a widow who lives with her son in California. To my surprise, she wrote me a note to say thank you for my part in her life. "How we all grew," she wrote. "And that little congregation, we were blessed, blessed, blessed. Thank you for coming to teach us about love."

The system works – wonderfully it seems. I am what I am because of congregations like this one and people like Marie and Lee – and because I learned to submit myself to the process, even kneeling from time to time.

And in it all and through it all, God feeds my soul. Come to the table and receive food for the soul.

Amen.

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