

Mystery Ingredients for a Fabulous Feast

Peter JB Carman

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Matthew 10:40-42

John 6:1-15

Over the past week in Vacation Bible School we have been learning about the secret ingredients of living joyfully and faithfully. Every morning we started with a skit, like today. We learned about waiting for God, and giving generously... and we learned about shaking it up! Every day the children (and I) also learned about various important festivals and meals from the bible.

As I got to see a little of what you children were doing, I got to thinking about mystery ingredients! I got to remembering how important meals were to Jesus, a long time ago. The meal was so important to Jesus that it became a central signpost in the early church, the heart of life together, not only communion, which we continue to celebrate, but other great meals, sometimes fancy food, but mostly very simple food. What made these gatherings great was not just the food. It was the OTHER mystery ingredients! The meals we share together, whether as families around a kitchen table or together as church communities, or feeding other people, still say a lot about how we live our lives as fellow travelers with Jesus.

I love the story we read this morning from John's gospel, because the bread and the fish in John's version don't come from the apostles—they come from a younger disciple. They are a child's gift. I love the story also because we find Jesus organizing the people in a way that allows them to share a little and come up with plenty of leftovers.

Maybe a miracle happened in that crowd when older people saw that a single child had contributed all that he had so they could eat! Maybe it shook loose a few crumbs and a few dry fish from their bags too.

Jesus often talked about his hopes for all humankind being like a great feast. Although there are different versions of the story, they include this: There's a banquet being thrown by a wealthy person, who invites all the important folks—but they can't be bothered to show up. Each one has some good reason or excuse. As the song goes, they all say, one way or another, "I can't come to the banquet, don't trouble me now!" So the host gets mad—and invites the other neighbors, all the *unimportant* folk. And when it turns out there's room for even more, it's out to the highways and byways, inviting not just the pilgrims but also the homeless folk, and the bandits for that matter.

Jesus talked about the way God wants things to be for all human beings, using the image of a great feast. What we have learned this last week is that if we want to throw a good feast we need to know how to prepare, how to cook it up. We need to know how to shake it up.

But when we are preparing for the great feast of *God*, there are some different ingredients needed, not just flour and yeast, not just pepper and salt. So just what are the mystery ingredients, for creating God's feast of plenty and love? I know there's a bunch of good spiritual cooks in here. Let me name one ingredient! We need to *love surprising company*. The people who show up aren't always the ones we expected. They aren't the guests who look like us, talk like us, even eat like us! So when they show up, we need to be ready—and happy to receive! Oh, and here's another key ingredient. We need to *be ready for unexpected help!* At the feast

of God, people don't just want to be honored guests. They are a lot happier when they are invited to help plan and serve at the party! Strange thing....

But what are some of the other ingredients? Turn to your neighbor, and have a little cooking talk—what are the mystery ingredients we need to prepare a truly fabulous feast, the feast of God? You have two minutes to plan, so make like chefs on cable TV! Tell each other what the ingredients are! I'm going to ask the children to share with each other too—and also with some adults. Go!

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When I was a child the person who taught me the most about hospitality was my mother, a woman who knew somehow how to welcome any one and every one to the table. Now, the funny thing was that folks thought my father was the religion expert. And yes, well, he was. But living in a little international community, my mother, Ineke, was the one who figured out every one's dietary needs, who talked Hindus, Muslims and Christians into teaching each other how to cook, who welcomed children and adults of every land and culture, easily and gracefully to share at a table of love.

In the bible, we are reminded that radical hospitality is at the heart of what it means to be people of faith who walk with Jesus. Christianity at its best is about some really risky sharing. Our own salvation is wrapped up with how open we are to welcoming others. We have to seize the initiative by offering love, not just love as words, but love in action. It's one thing to say "I love you" —important as that is! But it is something more to LIVE "I love you." And it is one thing to live "I love you" toward people we already know, who are just like us. It is another thing to cook for the people who are not YET our friends—it takes a certain openness and courage.

In the Gospel of John we find one child who was willing to share everything, and a whole lot of other people who were willing to take a risk simply on sitting together and sharing a bit of bread. It isn't easy to eat together with strangers! It isn't easy for a child to give away food when hungry. But I've known children—and adults—who had the courage to share when they had little or nothing to share.

Looking around us in the world it is hard to believe that humanity will someday feast all together. We are deeply divided. People despise each other because of gender or orientation or the color of skin! Just getting folk to sit down together seems impossible. And frankly if we are honest, just sitting down ourselves is hard.

This feast Jesus talked about isn't your conventional banquet. This is God's banquet. Christ knows what's going on... and God knows there is enough. Thing is, to get there we are going to have to be like that young disciple of long ago. Some day or another, we are, each one, going to have to be ready—to give it all away. Share it around. Take a chance that there is a grace that is greater than the evidence would suggest. And in that day, we are going to empty our pockets, invite our enemies, love strangers, hold hands with folk we haven't met before. Rich and poor, young and old, of every race and clan and nation we will be called to this risky business. We are going to shake it up, children, shake up those mysterious ingredients of love and justice, of really caring for the individual differences and specialness of our friends. We will find within us a fresh readiness to take some chances on an ancient and yet whole new recipe. God is going to make a whole new dish! You and I will just have to provide some seasoning and some leaven, some courage and some love. But we already have the ingredients.

Amen.