



From Exchange to Eucharist

John 6:24-35

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The past couple weeks, we've been considering the impact of the consumer society on faithful discipleship. Using Paul's admonition to the church in Philippi, we read how Paul suggested the best way to reject materialism was to embrace a sense of contentedness. Then we learned how to combat the negative effects of globalization through finding a sense of universal connectedness in Christ. Today, we are considering what it means to move from a mentality of consumerism that is based on the exchange of goods to a sense of communal support modeled in the Eucharist.

The economics of the consumer exchange model is based on an underlying assumption of scarcity. The scarcity model is what leads us to use the word *need* in place of the word *want*, when we already have plenty of that which we claim to *need*.

We all are susceptible to falling into this misidentification of needs. This is fairly well known, but in case you haven't heard, I love Apple products. But that wasn't always the case. In college, I had a Dell desktop – perfect for gaming. But, as I was entering grad school, I was looking at trading in the desktop for a laptop. I was considering the options of getting one of the early generation white plastic MacBooks. The alternative was a Dell or HP laptop, which seemed like good and solid computers. In talking with a relative who works in I.T., I posed the question, which should I buy, the more expensive MacBook or the less expensive Windows-based laptop? Their response? "You can buy the Dell and always wish you had bought a MacBook, or you can buy the MacBook."

Wow. In their answer, I heard this underlying conviction, I needed the MacBook. I may have been able to get by without it, but I would be missing out on something. I was convinced that I had no choice but to buy in to the Apple family. But this action was just the first of many in the line of claiming needs over wants.

This story sounds familiar ... if you give a tech guru a MacBook, he's going to need faster wifi at home. If you give him faster wifi, he's going to need more Apple devices to take advantage of the faster wifi. If you give him more Apple devices, he's always going to need the newest Apple device, which includes the new MacBook ... again.

You may not be someone who finds great passion in technology, but this cycle of supposed needs runs rampant in our lives in varied ways. For you, it may be the clothing, accessories, shoes, makeup, purse cycle. Maybe it's the kitchen, pots, knives, dishes, glassware cycle. Or maybe it's the home, paint, furniture, pillows, lamps, curtains cycle. One supposed *need* provides rationale for another supposed *need*.

In this consumer model that convinces us of unending needs, instead of giving up on material things when they do not easily satisfy, we turn to acquiring more consumer things. Possession kills the love; familiarity breeds contempt. Yet, instead of looking elsewhere for satisfaction, we just keep buying more and more stuff, convinced that we can not get by without such items, hoping and waiting for the time when we feel fully satisfied. Driven by this mentality, we feel like we have to have more. This is **scarcity** defined – it's as if we don't believe there's enough to go around, or that we'll be left behind to become subsistence farmers if we don't keep up with the Joneses. "For a number of reasons, desire in consumer society keeps us distracted from the desires of the truly hungry, those who experience hunger as life-threatening deprivation."ⁱ We can't see the true needs of others over our faux needs because, well, we have convinced ourselves we really don't have enough.

Because of this scarcity model that drives consumerism, the normal condition for the communication of goods is through trade. "The very basis of the market, trade – giving up something to get something else – assumes scarcity. ... Scarcity is the more general hunger of those who want more, without reference to what they already have."ⁱⁱ In this scarcity mentality, in order to get something, one must give something else in response. It's as if I can't afford to give you anything without getting something in response, because I don't believe I have enough to begin with. Even charitable giving follows this path. I'm at fault as much as anyone. I'm willing to give to charitable organizations, but I expect a warm feeling and a tax-deduction in response.

The other problem with the exchange model that is built from a scarcity mentality is that it puts us at odds with each other in terms of ownership. The exchange model says that goods are expressly personal possessions, and that the consumption of goods is a private experience. We even contract limits regarding what someone can do on their property next door because it may negatively affect my property value. Condo and Neighborhood Associations exact all kinds of funky rules because of what someone else's personal desires may do to the sale of my own land.

Admittedly, even as much as I take part in it, such a model of scarcity-driven exchange-based consumerism sounds unfaithful to me when I talk about it out loud. If this isn't kingdom based living, what is? How can we do better?

Let's turn to the gospel of John.

Our passage in John comes just after the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus had been near Tiberias, where he had performed the feeding miracle, turning 5 loaves of bread and 5 fish into enough food to abundantly feed the multitudes. That night, the disciples left by boat to cross the Sea of Galilee, headed for Capernaum. Jesus left *after* the disciples, and walked across the lake. The people who had been fed saw that the disciples had gone before Jesus, and that Jesus had not gotten into the boat with them. In the morning, the crowds awake, realizing the disciples and

Jesus have not returned. They look to the lake and see some empty boats on the shore line, so the crowds boarded the boats and went to find Jesus and the disciples.

They found Jesus on the other side of the lake, and inquired with him, “When did you come here?” ... That is, they wanted to know how Jesus had crossed the lake. They had seen the disciples leave without him, and they didn’t see him take a boat. When was it he found a boat to cross the lake?

Jesus responds to them, ignoring the question about how he got to the other side, saying, “You didn’t come here because of any signs or miracles. You came here looking for me because you’re hungry again.” In the feeding the day before, the crowds were impressed with Jesus’ turning a few loaves and fishes into a massive amount of food. Jesus had caught their attention, like any clown with a water squirting flower. But more than that, Jesus had earned their allegiance. If we look back to verse 15, we see that his act not only impressed them, it changed their perception of who Jesus *could* become. Verse 15 reads, “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” These were hungry people, longing for anyone or anything that could benefit their future. Jesus had fed them, rather unexpectedly – something no local governor, or king had even tried to do. They were ready to pledge their allegiance to Jesus and *force* him to be their king.

But Jesus rebukes them for such narrow thinking. He says, “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.” That is, don’t come looking to me just to give you physical bread and fish to eat. I didn’t come just to provide temporary sustenance; I came for you to have the food that endures for eternal life.

Not unexpectedly, the crowd doesn’t get it. Jesus is speaking of hard to understand concepts. They ask, “So what must we do to perform the works of God?” That is, if you know of a way that we can work to provide the kind of abundance you gave us yesterday for all eternity, let us know! We’ll do anything to have that kind of fill every day!

Jesus says, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”

Ohhhhhh. Things are starting to make more sense to them now. You’re telling us that to have that kind of eternal fulfillment, we have to believe in **you**. Skeptical though they remain, they begin to understand that Jesus is saying, ‘I am the way.’ And then we hear their response, as they ask, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? ... You know Jesus, our ancestors ate manna in the wilderness. Our historical Biblical texts tell us, ‘Moses acquired them bread from heaven to eat.’”

Moments like this in the Biblical narrative make it easy to understand why Paul defined God’s love in Christ as patient. Because friends, the crowds are beginning to frustrate the Lord.

Jesus had just performed for them a sign. Jesus had just fed them with an abundance left over to spare. His first miracle was good enough for them to want to make him king, but it wasn't enough for them to praise him as they praise Moses. Moses was the one who they believed God had sent. Moses was the one who had interceded on their behalf to help them escape slavery from the Egyptians and then survive their time of wandering in the wilderness. They bring up the Exodus and the manna, which Moses secured from God as life giving and ongoing sustenance.

"Instead of [answering them], Jesus picks a fight with Moses. 'It wasn't Moses who gave you bread,' he says. 'It was my father.'"iii This seems like an odd fight to pick. "No Jew would cut Moses off from God. No Jew would look at Moses and miss seeing God standing behind him."iv So why did Jesus react so strongly, implicating the crowds for missing the point?

We keep reading as Jesus keeps speaking, "The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." They said to Jesus, "Sir, give us this bread always." And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes me will never be thirsty."

Jesus's frustration becomes perfectly clear in his final statement. The people have been asking after sustenance that might sustain them for a day. Jesus is talking about eternal sustenance that will sustain them for a lifetime. They have come looking for more bread and fish, because they haven't felt so full in a long time. In their scarcity, in their hunger, in their thirst, they are willing to jump behind, support, and hail as king anyone who promises them a better life today and tomorrow. Sound familiar?

"[Jesus] is not trying to obfuscate the truth, but rather to reveal a difficult, counterintuitive, countercultural truth."v It has less to do with how satisfied your stomach may be, and focuses on how satisfied your heart may be. When we buy into the exchange model of consumerism, we buy in to the false notion that we don't have enough, and that we can only satisfy our scarcity through acquiring more.

But Jesus says the way to be fully satisfied is to accept Christ as the bread of life ... to believe in Christ as the one God sent to give eternal life.

Such an invitation is hard for us, because we are used to the exchange model. We are used to getting something in exchange for giving up something else. Christ says, all you have to do is have faith, receive me as the bread of life, and I will satisfy your every and eternal need. What Christ is naming is an invitation not to an exchange, but to the Eucharist.

We hear the words every week, and so perhaps we become immune to their invitation. Christ invites to this table all who love him, who repent of their sin, and who seek to be at peace *with one another*. The invitation is to acknowledge your own brokenness and your place among the larger body. In the Eucharist, in the remembrance of Christ ... in the acceptance and faith in Christ as the bread of life, we are invited to become part of the body. But the Eucharist is not

like the exchange. The Eucharist is not offered from a model of scarcity; it is offered with a promise of abundance. Jesus says, I am the bread of life, whoever – meaning EVERYONE – who comes to me will never be hungry again.

Because there is an abundance, we do not take part in this holy meal in fear of there not being enough. We do not hoard the bread or the cup for personal consumption. “The Eucharist effects a radical decentering of the individual by incorporating the person into a larger body.”^{vi} Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

We are just renaming what we have already studied about being the body of Christ in recent weeks. Christ says, what you did for the least of these, you did for me – because we are all one body. Paul says, the eye cannot claim there is no need for the ear, or the hand to say there is no need for the foot – because we are all one body. There is no personal ownership, only corporate participation.

Such a Eucharistic model breaks down the economic exchanges on which our economy runs. “[For] if we see employees and members of the wider community as members of our own body, [(of the community of Christ’s beloved)], then will will make our decisions with the well-being and development of those employees, the community, and the environment in mind.”^{vii}

In the Eucharist – not just in partaking the body of Christ at communion, but in being the body of Christ that is celebrated in the Eucharist – the line between givers and receivers becomes blurred. We acknowledge that we all have need for which we must receive and we all have gifts of which we must give. Without giving of the gifts we have, others cannot receive for the needs they have. Without receiving from others where we have need, others cannot give the gifts they have.

Christ invites us to change our model of living. Christ invites us to move from an exchange model, based on a mentality of scarcity, that says I’m only giving up what I know I’m getting paid for in return ... to a Eucharistic model, that says as a member of the body of Christ, who has faith in God’s great love in Christ to fulfil my every need, and therefore, I will give freely as I have gifts and receive freely as I have needs. For only in faithful receiving and giving are we fully participating in the body of Christ.

And this is the invitation for today. You are being invited to join in the great work of the body of Christ – to claim and name your place in the Eucharist.

ⁱ William T. Cavanaugh. *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire*. Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard W. Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of John: A Storyteller’s Commentary*. The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2010.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v William H. Willimon. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

^{vi} Cavanaugh.

^{vii} Ibid.