

How Jesus Serves Himself to Humanity
Based on excerpts from Professor Jonathan Stepp
The Practice of Ministry
Lecture 1: The Crucifixion of Ministry and Lecture 2: Preaching
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Recently we traveled through the entire gospel of the book of John together. We can note that John 21 launches an entire international ministry that was supposed to be done in a certain way. Jesus told Peter, “Feed my sheep!” Does Jesus care about the whole person: body, mind, and soul? How many think he cares about your body and my body? How many think he cares about your mind and my mind? How many think he cares about your soul and my soul? Now let’s add the question, what is it that Jesus has commanded us to eat that will nourish our body, mind and soul?

Clearly, in giving us the bread and wine as symbols of his body and blood Jesus meant to serve something to our minds and to our souls. He is serving to our minds and souls the truth that **he is in union with our human nature**, that the **Son of God has taken flesh and blood into the life he shares with the Father and the Spirit**. This knowledge, imparted to our minds by Jesus’ words, is a healing to our souls because it sets free the truth implanted within our souls by the Holy Spirit. That implanted truth is the **reality that we are adopted children of the Father** – expressed in the reality that the Son, Jesus, is one body and one blood with humanity – and therefore Jesus is our brother and Jesus’ Daddy is our Daddy.

This adoption of humanity into the life of the Trinity is of foundational importance to human self-understanding. How does Jesus serve this truth to us? He serves – or ministers – this truth to us in our souls, through his Holy Spirit; to our minds through his words (“this is my blood”, etc.); and to our bodies through the physical touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound of crunching bread and slurping wine. He ministers to us in body, mind, and soul, leaving no part of our personhood untouched by the reality of who we are in him. Communion, then, is a microcosm of the practice of ministry. The practice of ministry is our ongoing participation in

Jesus' act of serving his sheep the food they need to nourish their whole being: their bodies, minds, and souls.

In order for us to participate effectively in **Jesus' ministering of himself to humanity** some aspects of our thought and action will have to change. We will have to have our souls healed. We will have to have our minds changed. We will have to do new works with our bodies, works that reflect the reality of who Jesus really is with humanity and not who we have imagined him to be in our darkened minds.

Our souls, our minds, our bodies, and thus our **feelings, our words, and our actions**, all need to be baptized – i.e., immersed and soaked – in the image of God as Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. Here in the beginning of the 21st century we live in a Christian culture that has become dangerously and almost heretically Unitarian in its thinking about God. Once again, a simple definition of Unitarian means believing that God is not Father, Son and Holy Spirit but just Father.

First, let's consider how He nourishes our bodies. In him our bodies live and move and have their being (**Acts 17:28**) and by his word our bodies are held together and have their existence (**Col. 1:17, Heb. 1:3**).

Since he designed and created and gave life to us, undoubtedly this holistic approach is what Jesus had in mind when he told Peter “feed my sheep” (**John 21:17**). It includes the physical task of caring for people's bodies and thus a literal fulfillment in giving people food. In Peter's case he fulfilled the literal aspect of this commission in part by participating in the delegation of this work to others. Peter participated in the ordination of the first deacons (**Acts 6**) and they took care of the literal “waiting on tables” that is a necessary part of the Church's life together. By his participation in their ordination Peter was fulfilling the literal dimension of his commission to feed Jesus' sheep – he was making sure that their bodies got fed. (Our potluck participation is one way we participate in the delegation of this responsibility.)

We can take Jesus' commission to Peter as a definition of the practice of ministry. ***Practicing ministry means that we – together with Peter and the whole Church – feed the sheep of Jesus.*** We should see this definition in its holistic sense. The practice of ministry means caring for people's bodies, minds, and souls, the way a waiter at a table

cares for the needs of those who are enjoying a meal. One trap in ministry is to care only for people's minds and souls. Jesus warns us about that when he tells us not to tell others to "be warmed and filled" and do nothing for them (**James 2:16**). The Father has created us in the flesh, to live and experience relationship through touch, smell, taste, hearing, and sight. ***To minister to a person is to serve the needs of that person's body as well as the needs of his mind and soul.***

It is fairly easy to see that Jesus' command is also meant in a more figurative way. He not only means for Peter to provide people with food but also for Peter to provide spiritual nourishment to their minds and souls. In a very real way Peter is to become a "waiter" at the Lord's table, bringing spiritual food and drink to those whose souls are dying of spiritual starvation and spiritual dehydration.

At the same time, caring only for a person's body without bringing **knowledge to his mind** or healing to his soul is also to neglect the practice of ministry. Paul prayed for the people he ministered to that they might be given "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation" so that they might **know** Jesus, his Father, and the Holy Spirit better (**Eph. 1:17**).

Secondly, let's consider how He nourishes our minds. It is his mind that our minds were made to mirror (**1 Cor. 2:16**). Consider this about the mind: Preaching, more than almost any other ministry except counseling, addresses the **minds** of Jesus' people. The words, feelings, and thoughts in our minds are the very elements which Paul tells us need to be brought into captivity (**2 Cor. 10:5**). It is our minds that need to be renewed in order to enable us to believe what Jesus, the Word of God, is telling us about himself and us in him (**Rom. 12:2**).

As Christians we need to know and believe that there are right and wrong ways for us as human beings to think about God and ourselves. Wrong thinking about God, from Adam and Eve down to us, has been the source of much of our sin and suffering in our relationship with the Father and with one another. Some simple examples come readily to mind. Our fallen human nature leads us to think of God as distant and angry. In fact, in Jesus, we see that God is with us and forgives us. We naturally tend to think that God rewards us for our good actions and punishes us for bad actions. Yet we see in Jesus that bad things (like crucifixion) do happen to good people (like Jesus). Suffering often makes us think that God has distanced

himself from us but Jesus shows that suffering can mean that we are so close to him and that we are sharing with him in his sufferings just as he shares with us in ours.

A major part of a Pastor's participation in Jesus' ministry of preaching is the role of exposing the false, blinded thinking of listeners to the truth and light of **Jesus' correct thinking about God and humanity**. Just as a single light dispels the darkness in a room, so the light of the gospel dispels the darkness in the minds of people. As with all the ministry of Jesus, he could choose to do it supernaturally, without us, but he has chosen to include us in his work to **renew peoples' minds and help them bring their thoughts into captivity**.

Thirdly, let's consider how He nourishes our souls. It is the soul of his life with the Father that shows our souls the purpose of their existence (**Eph. 1:5**) which is to be adopted as sons and daughters of the Father. It also includes being given rest in that understanding (**Matthew 11:28-30**). Consider this about the soul: When I speak of ministering to peoples' souls I mean the inner depth of their being, at a level below conscious thought, where their true sense of self and identity resides.

So, when we say "soul" we simply mean the core reality at the heart of a person's existence. **This is the core reality out of which all their thinking and acting is flowing**. This is the place within our personhood where we most deeply perceive ourselves to be "good" or "bad", "loved" or "unloved", "accepted" or "rejected." The truth or lies that we **believe in our minds**, and the actions we **perform with our bodies**, can have a profound impact on this inner self-identity. Likewise, the **inner self-identity in our souls** can powerfully influence what we think with our minds and do with our bodies.

What does all this have to do with understanding our humanity in Jesus? Since we know that Jesus is the union of the Trinity with humanity, we have to understand that Jesus is fundamentally [available] in the soul of every human being. Deep within every human life, at the soul level, in the most basic core of our identity, is the fundamental truth that we belong. We are loved. We are accepted. **This is true because of the Son of God's union with our human nature in his humanity as the man Jesus Christ**. This truth is communicated to our souls by the Holy Spirit and this truth points us to the Father who loves and accepts us.

It is this core truth that causes us to scream out in pain when we are rejected, excluded, and told that we do not belong. At the most fundamental level, below even consciousness, **we know that we are loved and accepted in Christ**. So, when others try to make us feel unloved and excluded such a lie wars against the very nature of reality itself, **the reality that the Trinity is embracing all humanity**. Conversely, this means that when we hear the truth of our Daddy's love for us in Jesus that message resonates to the very depth of our being, in **our souls**. It rings true to us even if **our minds** cannot explain it and the actions of **our bodies** do not express it very well.

So let's review what we learned today In him our bodies live and move and have their being (**Acts 17:28**) and by his word our bodies are held together and have their existence (**Col. 1:17, Heb. 1:3**). It is his mind that our minds were made to mirror (**1 Cor. 2:16**) and it is the soul of his life with the Father that shows our souls the purpose of their existence and leads us to rest in Him (**Eph. 1:5, Matthew 11:28-30**).

This interplay of soul, mind, and body expresses itself in different ways depending on where peoples' minds are in the process of being renewed and bringing every thought into captivity. **Here are some examples of how people respond:**

- I wish I could believe what you're saying [soul] but I just can't see how it could be true [mind] so I'm not coming to your church anymore [body].
- I want to believe it [soul] but I just don't see how it fits with the Bible [mind] so I'm going to listen, but listen skeptically [body].
- Somehow I've always known that God had to be this way [soul] and I can't explain yet how I know its true [mind] but I want to learn and help others learn this truth [body].

Humanity was created for the **purpose of adoption into the Trinity**. It is the **shape** and **purpose** and **destiny** of every person. It is not just the destiny of our souls, it is the destiny of ourselves in our full personhood – soul, mind, and body. Since this adoption has been accomplished in Jesus this destiny is now infused into human nature itself in Christ Jesus. This purpose calls to us from the deepest place in our being where the Father is

loving us in Jesus, through the Spirit. Now, a final word about adoption, God has adopted all of humanity in Jesus Christ but some of His adopted children are good, some are bad, and some are ugly. But the reality is still that God loves them all. Our part is to show that the realization of adoption does change us. Our part is to show that God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit is a God of Grace, Communion with a total inclusive International adoption focus.

The practice of participation in Jesus' work of *serving himself to his people is to participate in communion.* Here, again, communion is helpful in visualizing this reality. At the communion table Jesus says "this is me, myself, that I am giving to you – my body and my blood." **It is Jesus who is continually, and forever, serving himself to humanity.** Jesus is the one who always engages in the practice of ministering himself to humanity. **At the same time, though, he graciously chooses to allow us to participate in his serving of himself to the world.** We practice this ministry because **Jesus is practicing it in us and with us and because we are in Jesus and with him as he ministers.** This is an area that we all need to grow in everyday. Through the ministry of the Church as a whole, and through each of us as individuals, Jesus conveys the reality of himself into the body, mind, and soul of the human race. Let's consider this truth now and throughout the week as we enjoy communion together with him and each other.