

# Sermon for Epiphany 7

The Text: Luke 6:27-34

Let's do some cooking. Let's make a stew.

Let's get our ingredients.

We'll slice it and grind it, peel it and marinate it, sear it and put it into a great big pot and let it cook slowly. And then we taste it. But there is something missing. There is a missing ingredient. What is it?

Jamie Oliver is a celebrity chef from the UK, very popular because he is so authentic about food, but also genuine in his relationship to people. Jamie was travelling around Italy looking for some of the really good food experiences.

He goes to the villages, and he meets the locals, and it is often the elderly grandmother who is known to be the best cook. He works with them, cooks with them, lets them show him how they cook, what their favourite ingredients are, how they prepare them and mix them all, and how they cook them slowly to bring out the very best of the flavours.

But when they sit down to eat there is one more ingredient. The whole family comes in. The food becomes a meal, when it is prepared for a family. The missing ingredient that makes that meal complete is the love for the family.

Food is not just food. Food is an expression of love and care for the family and for all who have the privilege of sharing in that meal.

That gives us a clue about the missing ingredient in our cooking. We can see our cooking as an act of love and care for our family, and for all who share our meal with us.

I want to look one step further. I want to see the missing ingredient in every meal as the love of our Father God. Because our Father God provides food to us and to all with a deep love. We can see food as an expression of the love of God.

We know that our food is necessary to nourish our bodies. We can be quite practical about food. Just make sure that you have the right amount of calories to provide the energy you need. But then we are still discovering just how complex and wonderful the workings of our bodies are. We are still discovering just how complex our foods are, what an incredible range of foods all provide the wonderful mix of nutrition that we need, together with the minute chemicals or vitamins that keep our bodies balanced. Our God who has created life, cares for our lives with a wonderful love.

But that is not all. Food is not just about nutrition. There is a beauty and wonder about the richness and flavour of food, so many different foods. Food expresses the cultures of people, their interaction with the living world. Your taste buds can respond to many thousands of different tastes. Not just so that you can be fed, but so that you can enjoy so many food experiences.

Your God does not just give you what you need. Your God feeds you in a way that you can enjoy. It is all part of the wonder of living in the world that our God has created, and in which our God has placed us.

The missing ingredient to a true appreciation of food is the love of God. That is why we say grace, recognising the grace of God in every meal that we eat.

Our God is the God who created our world with love, who created people with love, and who feeds people with a wonderful love.

But there is something else about the love of God. God does not love people because they deserve his love. God loves people because they need his love.

The whole story of the Bible is the story of how God loves people after they have turned against him. God loves people who have disobeyed him.

The Gospel text we heard talks of God as the *Most High*. God is the God who is over and above everything and everyone. And the Most High God is *kind to the ungrateful and the wicked*. That is the grace of God.

When we look at the lives of people, most people eat well. We believe that people eat well because God is good and God provides.

Some people recognise the goodness of God. Many do not. But that does not mean God stops feeding them.

Some people are thankful to God for their daily food. Many are not. But that does not mean God stops feeding them.

Some people use their lives to be positive and constructive and honest. Some choose to be wicked, to tear down others, to abuse the opportunities that are given to them, to show disrespect for God and for other people. Some live lives that are destructive, criminal. But that does not mean that God stops feeding them.

When we dig deeper and look at our own lives under the microscope of the will of God, we realise that we have all disobeyed God. We have all put our selfish wants in place of devotion to God. We are all in that ungrateful and sinful basket. But that does not stop God from feeding us. So our daily food is a constant sign of the grace of God. God loves us although we are people who do not deserve his love. God loves us as

people who need his love. God loves people who are hungry. God loves people and God feeds people.

The world of food today is so vast. There are so many different foods from all over the world. Like no other generation before, we have the opportunity to taste food from many different cultures. Our food sources have such variety. The styles of food that are available to us just walking down the aisle of our supermarkets are so varied. Not to mention the choices we have if we want to go into town and dine out.

Our food is rich and varied. But there is one ingredient that turns any or all of the foods into a true meal. The love of God is the secret ingredient. But now Jesus calls on us to put that same ingredient into our own lives. If the Most High God is our heavenly Father, if the Most High God treats us with a deep and personal love, and if we recognise the love that is the grace of God, then we are to also add that love to what we do.

If this God is our Father, we are God's children. So it should be in our genes, in our spiritual genes. It should become part of who we are, and how we live.

That is the words of Jesus that we heard in the Gospel. Jesus has taught: *love your neighbour as you love yourself*. Be just as careful and concerned about all the people around you, as you are careful and concerned about yourself.

Now he goes the next step. *Love your enemies*.

Love your neighbour even if that neighbour is someone who despises you and wants to harm you. Do good to all people – even those who hate you, and want to hurt you. Bless people, and bring God's blessing to them - even those who curse you, who want to verbally wipe you out.

Turn the other cheek to someone who has slapped you. Hold back that instinct that says you want to get even. You want to show who is in control. You want to hit and hit harder so that person does not try it again. Hold back your own violence, even if it means you suffer violence again. Why? Because you are children of this heavenly Father. And because your God loves, loves those who hate him, loves those who hurt him and continue to hurt him.

Why? Because you know the grace of God, and because you are living with that grace. Here is the practical expression of living with the love and grace of God.

Jesus says that most people are generous sometimes, when it suits them. He knows that there are natural bonds that draw people together, and in any family and in any social group people have their own ways of giving and receiving. But giving is always based on also receiving.

So Jesus says: Yes, you might love those who love you – but so what.

*What credit to you is that? Even sinners love those who love them.*

He says: You might do good to those who do good to them. But so what?

*What credit to you is that? Even sinners do that.* We will often do a favour for someone – but if I do you a favour, you owe me a favour in return.

That's *fair* – but it is not Christian *love*.

And if you lend to someone, that might help them out. But you expect to get everything paid back. Maybe with some interest thrown in. It is part of our way of social support. But it is not Christian love.

We have our ways of getting on with most people most of the time. It is a system of exchange. We expect to get out what we put in. It is an important part of our social fabric. But it is not Christian love.

Christian love gives where there is no natural bond, even where there is hatred or suspicion. Christian love gives, not because we have to or we are expected to. But because someone needs our help.

Christian love is not motivated by what we are going to get back, but by what someone needs. Christian love is shaped according to the generous love of our Father God.

We heard a good example in our first reading, part of the story of Joseph and his brothers.

The brothers had picked on Joseph, plotted to kill him, and eventually sold him into slavery. Through a long series of ups and downs, Joseph eventually was raised up to be the governor of Egypt, and he was put in charge of the food supply in Egypt.

Meanwhile his family were experiencing famine in their own country and they came to Egypt looking for food. This put those treacherous brothers into the power of the one they had treated so badly.

Finally Joseph revealed to them who he was. They were terrified, sure that now he would take revenge. But he said no, it was not his job to punish. He was delighted to be able to help his brothers and their families. He would feed them, would even bring them to his country where they would be provided for.

Why? Because he recognised how God had been gracious to him. Now he wanted to be gracious, even to those brothers who had treated him so badly.

Our God is gracious and merciful. Our food is a constant reminder of the grace and mercy of God. Jesus says to us: *Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

Share your food, because people are hungry, and need food. No matter who they are. Even if they are people who we might regard with suspicion or hatred. Giving and sharing is a wonderful way to break down

differences and prejudices. We might find that we don't even have to think of people as enemies. When we are showing love they are not going to be enemies.

Be merciful, as you respond to needs in other places, for people who are caught in famine or in conflict. Again, they may appear as people who are very different. Learn to empathise with them as fellow human beings. Feel their hunger. Grasp their plight. And respond with compassion and mercy. Our God is merciful and gracious. The food that we receive is a gift of God's grace, every day. The food that we give, and our gifts of money and of time and personal effort, whatever we give to those in need, that is a sign that we have learned to live with the grace of our Father God. Love, deep grace-filled love, is the ingredient that turns food into a meal, into a meal for all. Amen.