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Good Eats

Let us pray: Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scripture to be written for our benefit: Grant that we may hear these words, - read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

“This is the bread that came down from heaven... the one who eats this bread will live forever.” John 6:58 (Jn. 6:41-44;47-59;66-68)

I don't know about you but I have never considered eating to be much of a Christian discipline. I am pretty good at it – already. And in truth, it does not strike me as a particularly costly form of discipleship. I like to eat, though I am not sure it adds to my general sense of holiness or increases my faithfulness. Rather, it increases other aspects of my life more than I want, really. But eating seems to have been one of the main ways Jesus shared himself with his disciples, one of the main ways he invited folk into his own life.

There is one miracle that occurs in all four of the gospels: Jesus' feeding of the 5,000. His disciples are criticized for eating too much and at the wrong time. He himself is called a glutton and a winebibber. How many scenes are there in the New Testament where Jesus is eating in the house of a Pharisee and some glimpse of the Kingdom is displayed over dinner

conversation? How many of Jesus' parables involve a banquet, the slaying of a fatted calf, the call to come "rejoice with me"? What does Jesus do the night that he was betrayed? He eats with his own. He feeds the 5,000. He feeds the 4,000. He seems to be in the feeding business.

The gospel text appointed to be read today comes from the 6th chapter of the gospel of John in which Jesus feeds the 5,000 and then, when the crowd understandably wants to make him king – after all, it is no mean trick to feed 5,000 folk with 5 loaves and two fish; think what it would mean in a world of vast hunger if Jesus would just do this trick on a regular basis. Why, he would be king of the world – which is what the crowd wanted to make him and from which prospect Jesus fled as fast as he could, telling the crowd that the only reason they wanted to make him king was because their bellies were temporarily filled with bread. In contrast, he says, "I am the bread of life." Eating this bread is not the same or as easy as polishing off a good meal. Jesus' eats are a kind of soul food and rather than satisfying our hunger, they increase it, until what we want is Jesus himself.

So how do we eat Jesus? It all sounds too gross, too barbaric, as if Jesus were some kind of commodity that we consume. Jesus' own people found the idea repulsive. "Hey, isn't this Joseph's son; what makes him think he's so special?" What is this bread that comes down from heaven? What does this guy mean "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you"? It sounds almost cannibalistic.

Which is why we should pay particular attention to these words. They do shock us. How could Jesus imagine that knowing him, following him, serving him would involve such closeness, such inward digestion, such chewing, such bodily incorporation? Can he really get inside us like that? Can we really take him in like that?

Underneath John's words is the image of that banquet in which Jesus offers himself to us in bread and wine. We

Protestants have so spiritualized that sacrament as to hardly think of it as taking Jesus into ourselves, though our Orthodox and Roman Catholic brothers and sisters are under no illusion in that regard. They think they are feasting on Jesus, not memorializing some death or reflecting on their own inadequacy but receiving food for the journey, the very bread of life.

But the feast is not confined to the bread and wine. The feast includes the word, digesting this story, eating this book. That is the reason, I believe, that people persist in coming to church: they're hungry. They think, hope, perhaps, that Jesus' restaurant, aka First Presbyterian Church, is open on Sunday morning and will be setting a meal for them, will fill them with gospel nourishment, will not fob them off with sweets or candy or dessert but will provide them with nourishing food, strength for the journey, good eats, the bread of life.

When Jesus refused to let the people crown him king, refusing to put a chicken in every pot as if bread alone were enough, most of the folk became disillusioned with him and we read, they "turned back." So often that is what happens in John's gospel. There is an initial surprise, a happy misunderstanding: the man can turn water into wine, feed 5,000, open the eyes of the blind, provide living water, what's not to like? But then a slow discovery sets in: he is not about what we thought; he is about more than wine, his bread is not cheap but infinitely costly, when he opens the eyes of a blind man it might result in his being kicked out of the synagogue, his living water might reveal your very soul. Maybe it would be better to remain blind; maybe we should just get used to our blindness; maybe the bread and fish weren't really that great. Maybe we would do better to get used to our hunger and call it normal. Maybe we should just deny that we were ever hungry in the first place.

So most folks turned back. In the gospels that is what inexplicably happens. A parable John does not tell but which serves as a commentary on this passage, is Jesus' parable of a

great banquet to which a man invited many. Many. “Come,” the invitation said, “for all is now ready.” But those who were invited began to make excuses: I have bought a piece of land and need to inspect it; I have bought some oxen and need try them out; I have married a wife, and cannot come.” All good excuses. All so persuaded that whatever hunger they might have is not so compelling as to bring them to the banquet. So the man invites others: Go out to the streets and lanes, highways and byways, and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame, and compel people to come in so that my house may filled. There are good eats here. This word is the bread of life; this is my body; this is my blood.

So often in the gospel the issue is not whether God can provide, whether the crowd will be fed, whether the lost sheep will be found, whether the prodigal will be received by his waiting father. No, the issue is whether there will be people to eat at the banquet, whether the elder brother will find it possible to come in; whether you can rejoice; whether you are hungry enough to sit at this table, to eat these words.

When I was a pastor in Texas our church, like so many other congregations, would go to Mexico to build a house or put a roof on a church or do some other good deed. Our chosen place was Piedras Negras, a town of about 300,000 souls on the other side of the Rio Grande from Eagle Pass. I forget what we were doing, building a house maybe, when the mission co-worker suggested that I accompany her on a visit to a family who had recently started coming to the church there. I was not enthusiastic about this venture: I did not speak Spanish; I had come to build the house not do pastoral calling, but she insisted and I went.

The family lived outside of town in an uncharted colonia made up of three streets, which were really washed out corduroy roads full of bumps and deep holes. The impoverished residents of the colonia had given their own names to these three streets, and they called them: faith, hope, and love streets. The Sanchez

family lived on Esperanza St. in a hovel, partly sheltered by a tin roof, plastic sheeting, and old wooden pallets. Beside the house was a mesquite tree and a cleanly-swept dirt floor where Mrs. Sanchez had placed some benches and a couple of folding chairs. When we arrived she asked us if we would like a soft drink, and one of her children fetched one for each of us. She was proud of her home. Her children had come to Vacation Bible School at the church and from that contact, she and her husband had started attending worship. They walked to church. 3 miles there and 3 miles home. They were hungry, hungry for their children, for their family, for themselves. And they were not ashamed of their hunger. In fact, that is what made them such hospitable hosts. They figured we were hungry too. They did not know that I had come reluctantly. They did not know how well-fed I was or how much a distraction from my busy schedule I would find all of this. No; they had tasted Christ; they had shown up at the banquet; they were enjoying the meal. Their hunger made me ashamed of my self-sufficiency and I have never forgotten the house on Esperanza St. or the gracious way in which I was fed there.

It is so easy to “turn back”, to be distracted by the muchness with which we are surrounded and think that it can somehow fill us up. What are you eating these days? What are you hungry for?

I wonder what our church is eating these days, what we are hungry for? Winning arguments? Loving a left wing or right wing cause more than the banquet itself, where, after all, we do not get to choose the person sitting next to us? Or are we eating our own desire for self-preservation, consuming our fears more than trusting in the Lord who feeds thousands of hungry people every day. Or worse, have we gotten good at denying our hunger altogether, starving ourselves on what we call success, happy to feed others as a way of confirming our own muchness and in the hopes we won't be called upon to love them.

I wonder what theological seminaries are eating these days. It is so easy to be content with bread alone: the bread of brilliance, of numbers, of that great illusion of self-sufficiency that persuades us that we are not hungry at all. We have more than enough.

It is hard to feed someone who is not hungry. We all should pray to God for such an appetite. Jesus turns to his disciples after most of the crowd had left and asked them, “Do you wish to go away also?” Have you had enough? Are you also full? And Peter, bless him, responds, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” You are the banquet. Make us ever hungry for you.

To whom shall we go? To the market place? To the culture’s good opinion? To ourselves? All of these are ways we try to convince ourselves and others that we are not really hungry. There is only one who can empty us of self, only one who has the good eats that gives us strength to be hungry, only one who makes us glad enough to eat this food and share it with others. He is the bread of life and his restaurant is always open. As the Pharisees noted, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Indeed he does. About that, they were completely correct. Amen.