

“We Are What We Eat”

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Scriptures: Deuteronomy 8:1–10; Psalm 34; Ephesians 4:17–5:2; John 6:37–51

I can't remember where I read it, but I came across some research a while ago that suggested a major contributor to excess calories in the diet of a working age person was not the choices made in meal planning, but in daytime snacking on food that is available in the office. And while I do not know the validity of the research, I can tell you that anecdotally in my experience this is very true. I cannot resist an office snack. My working context means that there are usually plenty of snacks available, whether that is from a lovely gift of some cookies dropped off for the staff or the inevitable leftovers from a church event that end up in the office refrigerator. And this past week, we not only had the anniversary party, but this came at the end of a St. Benedict's module weekend. In short - the fridge was packed, and my snacking reflected that! I really have to watch my discipline in these times, because my body is pretty effective at convincing me that I need just one more snack.

Hunger can be a powerful force. We've all been hangry - so hungry that our fuse burns just a little more quickly. When we feel a physical need, all other things seem to pale in comparison. We become mono-focused. Desire, whether for food or any number of things, has a tendency to block out other important considerations and values.

Here is the temptation of hunger of all kinds: To rely on what satisfies temporary needs and to neglect those things which are eternal, more important.

“Bread is not enough,” Jesus says to Satan as he is tempted in the wilderness. We know the end of that story and that our fully human savior had his human need for nourishment satisfied by his Father in the end, but he was unwilling to compromise on his principles to get the job done himself. Jesus understood that God provides, but we like him must never let that provision eclipse our pursuit of him and his ways.

There’s a lot of food talk, there’s a lot of bread talk in our gospel reading for today. And this makes sense. The conversation that our text comes from the middle of is a followup to the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand at the beginning of John chapter six. Then we have the interlude of Jesus walking on the water and the crowd going around the Sea of Galilee to try and find Jesus again. They seem to gloss over the mystery of how he got to the other side without a boat and get straight to the point. They want him to feed them again. Jesus sees right through the scheme of course, and calls them out for it (John 6:26). He invites them to seek the eternal bread which will never go bad. They seem to continue to miss the point, because they bring the conversation back to manna in the wilderness. When Jesus speaks again of eternal bread, they ask him to give it to them in perpetuity (6:34). They are still thinking about filling their stomachs.

So Jesus needs to make it more plain - *he* is the Bread. John 6:35, repeated in verse 48, is one of the definitive “I am” statements that we see throughout John’s gospel. He is the source from which true flourishing comes. This characterization of Jesus as an infinite source of sustenance calls to mind the conversation just two chapters earlier with the woman at the well, where he refers to himself as the one who possesses living water that will never run dry.

In contrast with that faithful Samaritan woman, who responded to the gospel with honest questions and ended up being one of the first evangelists of Jesus’ good news, this claim of

being the true bread that came down from heaven upsets the leaders who are listening. All this is starting to sound a little blasphemous to them and so they grumble.

Jesus then makes the connection clearer, by going back to the wilderness. He connects the everlasting bread, himself, to the manna in the wilderness, saying that those who ate the manna died, but whoever partakes of what he is offering will have eternal life. He is the pinnacle of God's provision, for he is God offering himself.

This brings us back to our Old Testament reading (Deuteronomy 8:1-10), which also looks back at the manna in the wilderness, but from the perspective of the people entering the Promised Land. The nature of God's provision is about to change for the people. God has something bigger and better for them in the Promised Land, but they can't forget in the midst of greater provision who it is that provides and what it is that he requires.

The reminder to keep God's law shows up twice in the passage (v. 1, 6), amidst reminders of the provision in the desert and the promise of provision in the Promised Land. The provision in the desert was miraculous. Manna came from heaven; sandals and tunics didn't wear out. But the provision in the Promised Land will feel different. The land will be worked and will produce a bounty. It will be easier to assume the provision is the result of the people's own effort. This is why keeping the commandments becomes even more important, because God's work will be easier to glance over. It is easier to forget God in a time of plenty than in a time of need. It is easier to recognize his power in the opened Red Sea than in the fertile ground that grows what is planted. But he calls us to obedience at both. He deserves our thanks at both.

God has something better in store for the people in the Promised Land. But there is also a risk. They can choose to rely on their newfound provision combined with their own strength and forget the one who provides. If they are not careful, they will start to disobey. And of

course, that is what happens, both in the story of Israel and in our own lives. We get comfortable with the blessings God gives to us and we start to attribute those things to our own effort. Then we forget God. We turn to our own ways. Before we know it, we are back in the wilderness.

The provision of the Promised Land was a greater provision, but it still was not the ultimate solution to the world's need. A still greater provision was necessary: a True Manna, one that would never run out, never leave us, and tie us eternally to the life that is in the one who gives. That is what Jesus came to provide.

We just celebrated our 18th Anniversary as a church family. We have recognized the blessings of God in this Promised Land as they combine with the good work of his saints here. What a beautiful thing! But if we lose sight of the greater provision that is available only in Jesus himself, if we stray from his side by not obeying his commandments, we are headed for the wilderness. So let us rightly celebrate the gracious provision that God has bestowed upon us at Apostles, but let us also hear this encouragement as we walk into our ecclesiastical adulthood: cling tight to Jesus. Walk in his ways. Do not forsake his words. Even the Promised Land and its plentiful produce cannot compare to the one who came to give himself as bread for the life of the world. Material abundance will come and go, but eternal life doesn't fade.

This talk of bread and eating in our gospel presents to us an interesting answer to the problem of obedience. By the problem of obedience I mean the reality of our fallenness, our propensity to do what is wrong and not to do what is right. We see this in the disobedience of the people of Israel while they were in the Promised Land and reaping its blessings and we see it all the way to the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 7: he does not

what he wants, but what he does not want to do - that which is sin. This is a great struggle of the Christian life, to remain faithful in obedience.

What does that have to do with bread? Well, it turns out that we all learned the truth when we were young. "You are what you eat." This is a true statement. It's the truth in a very literal sense that some of the calcium that makes up my bones, some of those molecules literally came from broken down pieces of things, probably dairy things, that I have eaten. The carbon that makes up my cells was at sometime carbon in another plant or animal. I am composed, on a molecular level, of what I have eaten. But that is not usually what we mean when we say, "You are what you eat." We mean that if we eat food that is nourishing and healthy, we have a better shot at being healthy, at feeling good and strong. If we eat things that are not good for us, our health and energy are likely to reflect that.

If what we consume is the True Bread, the Bread of Life that has come down from heaven, that changes who we are. Good and healthy physical food can have a temporary effect, but Jesus offers something permanent, and the changes that come along with it are permanent, too. When we receive him, we are not the same. This new self is marked by a life of Christ-likeness. We are what we eat!

This is the force behind our reading from Ephesians today. We are new people, filled with True Bread. When Jesus says that we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth in the Sermon on the Mount, there is no equivocation or allowances for us to not be those things when we don't feel like it. Paul's words in Ephesians carry the same assumption: "You *must* no longer walk as the Gentiles do..."(Eph 4:17) The vices that Paul goes on to list, sensuality, greed, impurity, these are the things done by those who have not partaken of the Bread of Life. The old self is gone, the new self has come.

Our salvation is in nothing but the Bread himself, in Jesus. We are not saved by the good things that we do. But we are what we eat. By receiving him, our lives change, from the old self to the new, from sin to righteousness. And beginning in verse 25 of Ephesians 4, Paul lays out some pretty specific markers of those who have received Christ: They are honest. They do not let their anger cause them to sin. They don't deal dishonestly or steal; they don't speak ill of others, but speak words that build up and encourage. Bitterness and wrath are off the table. Their lives are marked by kindness, tenderness, and forgiveness.

The reading ends with Paul's encouragement for us all to imitate God. We are what we eat. Those who have received him are to be like him. And notice how this is all summed up: "And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." Love. Christ-like love. That's the whole ballgame.

In a few moments, we will hear the Celebrant say at the table that we are to "Feed on [Christ] in [our] hearts by faith with thanksgiving." Jesus himself has laid down his life for us, so that we may receive him and have life in his name. As we receive, we are renewed and transformed. We partake of Jesus to be his representatives, his body to the world. That representation comes down to loving like he loves us. We are what we eat.

In his book titled after this passage, *For the Life of the World*, Alexander Schmemmann has written this about the necessity and centrality of love for everything we do in the Christian life: "The Church, if it is to be the Church, must be the revelation of that divine Love which God "poured out into our hearts." Without this love nothing is "valid" in the Church because nothing is possible."

Do you want the recipe for True Bread that satisfies eternally? Here's the bad news: you can't make it yourself. But here's the good news. The one who is the Bread offers himself to you. He is Love and he is yours if you would come after him. One thing is for sure: after you eat this Bread, you will not be the same.