

## ***You Are What You Eat***

John 6:51-58

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Have you had your fill of bread yet? A few months ago, when I was mapping out my summer sermons, I noted with some hesitation that the lectionary spends five weeks in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to John. Five weeks in one chapter isn't always a challenge for a preacher, for often there are multiple stories found within the same gospel chapter. But here in the sixth chapter of John, we have essentially one extended story focusing on one primary theme: Jesus as the Bread of Life. And so today we're in our fourth week of bread. For those of us who preach, it is a challenge to find yet more ways to use bread as the central illustration. Thom is also feeling the strain, as earlier this week he noted that it is becoming more and more difficult to come up with music that incorporates the bread-of-life theme.

We began this extended study of Jesus as the Bread of Life with the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand people. A pastor preaching on that text asked his congregation, "Who here can feed 5 people with 5,000 loaves and 2 fish?" A member in the front row raised his hand. The pastor was surprised but went on with his sermon. Afterward, the pastor asked the member, "How in the world do you think you could feed 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish?" The member pointed out the pastor's error, "You asked if I could feed 5 people with 5,000 loaves and 2 fish. That, of course shouldn't be too hard."

So the next week the pastor stepped into the pulpit and said, "I understand that last week I really messed up my sermon with my opening question. So this week, I'll try again. Who can feed 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish?" The same member in the front row raised his hand again. After the service the pastor approached the member a second time and asked him, "Didn't I say it right this time? How are you going to tell me you'll feed 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fish?"

The member replied, "I'd use the leftovers from last week!!"

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Hear now the word of God as it comes to us in the sixth chapter of the Gospel According to John, beginning to read in the 51<sup>st</sup> verse...

...The grass withers, and the flower fades, but the word of our God shall stand forever.

This portion of Jesus' discourse with the people who had followed him after the miraculous feeding is one that is particularly shocking to our sensibilities. It is the passage that, more than any other, opponents to the Christian faith have pointed to as advocating some kind of gruesome cannibalistic ritual. The language of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus is even more vivid here than in those passages in the other gospels that deal with the Last Supper. In fact, you won't find the Last Supper in John's telling of the gospel. And so the sixth chapter becomes John's way of describing, not so much the Last Supper itself, but the theological meaning behind the celebration of the sacrament of communion. As John points out at the beginning of the chapter, before Jesus fed the multitude, he gave thanks and broke the bread, much the same way as the other gospel writers describe in their accounts of the Last Supper. And here in this morning's text we find language that points to the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death for our salvation to eternal life.

Instead of a teaching about cannibalistic rituals, then, this morning's lesson is essentially John's way of describing the meaning of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. And so the language of eating the flesh and drinking the blood takes on new meaning. You see, throughout this sixth chapter Jesus goes back and forth between the language of eating and drinking, and language of belief, so that eating and drinking become synonymous with belief. In communion, then, the acts of eating the bread and drinking from the cup are meant to be enactments of our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Eating and drinking are metaphors for belief, faith.

Think about it. When we eat and drink, we are consuming things that we trust will give us life, or will satisfy our hunger or thirst; sometimes we eat simply for the sake of pleasure. We eat for nourishment. We eat for

satisfaction. There's a reason we call some foods "comfort food." Some people seek satisfaction by consuming alcohol. Some seek satisfaction by putting too much unhealthy food into their bodies. Some think the best thing to do is to starve their bodies. Whatever it is we decide to put into our bodies or not put into our bodies, we are doing so because it somehow fits our own understanding of what will best nourish us, or satisfy our appetites, or give us enjoyment.

Eating is a matter of taking into ourselves that which we deem important and life-giving.

And so when Jesus says, "I am the bread of life,"<sup>1</sup> and "I am the living bread which came down from heaven,"<sup>2</sup> and then when Jesus goes on to say, "If any one eats of this bread, they will live forever,"<sup>3</sup> Jesus is not speaking of our literal consumption of his flesh and blood; instead, Jesus is speaking of the absolute commitment of faith he is calling us to make. Eating is an act of commitment, an act of trust, an act of faith. For us to eat the body of Jesus and to drink his blood is to confess our faith in Jesus as the One who gives and sustains life. It is the way we say, "I choose you, Jesus! I choose you for my salvation. I choose you as the One and only One who can give me the abundant, eternal life for which my soul so desperately hungers."

Don't you see—faith isn't something we can take casually. We can't just sit back and think about Jesus, and call it faith. Faith is a matter of ingesting Christ into our lives, of seeking in Christ alone that which will satisfy the hunger and thirst of our soul. It means making Jesus flow through our veins. It means making Jesus such an integral part of our lives that there is no way we can separate who we are from who Jesus is.

William Willimon puts it this way. He says,

"Wouldn't the Christian faith be easier if it were a matter of mere belief or intellectual assent! No, today's rather scandalously carnal, incarnational gospel [lesson] reminds us that Jesus intends to have all of us, body and soul. His truth wants to burrow deep within us, to consume us as we consume him, to flow through our veins, to be digested, to nourish every nook and cranny of our being."<sup>4</sup>

Faith is a visceral, total engagement with Jesus. Jesus becomes part of us, and we give ourselves to him. The next time you receive communion, think about what you're doing as you put the bread in your mouth and as you put the little cup to your lips. It is a symbolic way of confessing that as the bread and the fruit of the vine nourish and spread through your bodies, so are you inviting Jesus into your life, to grant you life and to sustain you by His Spirit.

In dietary circles, you'll often hear someone say, "You are what you eat." And in a sense, it is true. Not in the sense that you'll turn into a McDonald's french fry if you eat them every day, but in the sense that the food we consume shares its nature with us. And so if we have a diet that is high in its concentration of fatty foods, then we're going to increase our own fat stores. Or if we have a diet that is moderate in calorie, carbohydrate, and fat intake, then it is more likely that we will be more well-balanced in our physical health. Consumption of healthy foods will give us a better chance of having healthy lives; consumption of unhealthy foods will increase the likelihood that we will experience health problems.

The point is this: we make choices about what we will consume. And in so doing, in some way we participate in the nature of the things we consume. We can't consume something without it having an effect on us.

The same can be said about what we consume into our soul. Some of the things we put into our lives have a bad effect on us. Some of the books we read, or some of the things we watch on TV, or some of the activities we participate in will not promote good spiritual health. We participate in the nature of what we consume, whether the consumption is physically into our bodies, or spiritually in our souls.

You see, you can't consume the body and blood of Christ without taking on something of the nature of Christ. That's something you have to understand. Your life will be different when you partake of the Bread of Life.

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<sup>1</sup>John 6:35

<sup>2</sup>John 6:51a

<sup>3</sup>John 6:51b

<sup>4</sup>William Willimon, in Taylor and Bartlett, editors, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 361.

Because when you partake of Jesus, then you are choosing to participate in his nature and his work, which is, as he says, “for the life of the world.” Eating and drinking of Christ means we choose to become more and more like him day by day, and we choose to participate in Christ’s mission to the world.

Martha Rollins founded a ministry in one of the roughest neighborhoods of Richmond, Virginia. Her ministry seeks to help newly-released inmates make a successful transition back into the world, by offering counseling and job training skills. In describing her work, she points to this passage in John, claiming that when we partake of the bread of life, we do so not just for ourselves, but for the life of the world. When we consume Christ, she says, “It means that I can’t go home and watch my brother hungry, lonely, afraid—the bread of heaven given for the life of the world calls us to the life of the world—to feed, clothe, visit, preach.”<sup>5</sup>

Your life will be different when you partake of the Bread of Life. Because when you partake of Jesus, then you are choosing to participate in his nature and his work. Eating and drinking of Christ means we choose to become more and more like him day by day, and we choose to participate in Christ’s mission to the world.

We choose the things we will consume to give us life.

And we participate in the nature of those things we consume. We are, in a very real sense, what we eat.

Does your life indicate a diet low in fat, moderate in calories and carbohydrates, ...and heavy in Jesus?

Take, and eat, says Jesus.

Eat of my flesh, says Jesus.

For you are what you eat.

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<sup>5</sup>Martha Rollins, Join the Feast website, Wednesday, July 15, 2009, <http://jointhefeast.blogspot.com/2009/07/august-16-2009-john-651-58-martha.html>