

“A Good Meal”

Sermon by Rev. Glenn Brumbaugh

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Proverbs 9:1-6 NRSV / John 6:51-58 NRSV

When we think of food, what’s the first thing that comes to our mind?

Is it the delicious aroma of our favorite dishes,

or the taste of those delicacies that can make our mouth water?

It also might make us think about the meals shared with others,

or the celebrations of our lives where food plays a central part.

Our thoughts about food change during the course of our lives as well.

When we’re young, we seek the food that tastes the best,

that we enjoy eating the most,

and often avoid that which we don’t find enticing.

Then as we age, and words like “glucose, cholesterol, and triglycerides”

enter our vocabulary, our focus can shift yet again.

We start to seek foods that keep our body running well,

and that try to reduce the damage of the aging process.

Regardless of our current perspective on food in our lives,

how much thought do we give to the actual nuts and bolts

of the relationship between ourselves and food?

We get hungry and we eat. What more is there?

SLIDE

Well, a lot happens when we put food into our mouths, chew and swallow.

Our stomach acid and other enzymes start to chemically alter what we eat
from the first moment we put the food in our mouths.

Those chemicals in our body convert the complex compounds in our food
into more basic elements,
that are then absorbed into our bloodstream
and extracted by the tissues and cells that need them.

As a liberal arts major in college,
that's about the extent of my biology knowledge,
but the main point is that our bodies change what we eat
into elements that are absorbed into
and become integral parts of our own bodies.

And what isn't converted is, well, "discarded,"
in one way or the other.

You might say we are a self-sustaining, well-designed
chemical power plant that converts organic fuel
into the energy and support
the factory needs to keep running.

That covers the our physical nourishment,
but what about our spiritual needs?

How does that system run?

Well, that's where our story from John comes in today.

Jesus goes into detail to discuss how we feed our spiritual body's needs.

But as he often does in John, he starts a little on the controversial side

to get their attention.

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Initially he starts by comparing himself to the manna from heaven

that the Israelites survived on during the Exodus story.

He ties himself to the central story of their history as a people
and their covenant with their God.

Certainly that would generate debate

with the religious authorities in the audience at Capernaum,
but he takes it a step further.

He doesn't just say that he himself as an individual person
is manna,

but actually says that it is his flesh,

the meat on his bones,

that is the bread of life from God.

SLIDE

And pushing the envelope even further

he adds that unless you eat his flesh and drink his blood,

you have no life in you.

In other words, you won't see eternal life.

Now for us, looking back a couple of millennia later,

we might say what's the big deal?

The New Testament is full of these metaphors for Jesus' sacrifice
and our redemption.

What is different in these passages is the words he chooses to use.

In the rest of the canon,

when talking about the Eucharistic body,

the word that is used is “soma”

which is the generic term for the body as a whole.

But the word he uses in this passage, “sarx,”

actually means one’s flesh,

the literally meat and tissues on our bones.

He is intentionally using language

that will pull his listeners away from that positive cultural memory

of manna from heaven into a completely different territory.

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For us, the thought of eating human flesh

brings to mind grotesque images of things

like the TV show “The Walking Dead”

or the story of the Donner party.

For his contemporary Jewish audience,

they would be reminded of similarly distasteful stories and legends,

and would see such notions as abominations on multiple fronts.

Jewish dietary law strictly forbids

the consumption of blood as blasphemous.

The butchering process, especially for temple sacrifice,

involved the draining and separation of the flesh

from the blood.

The blood is poured out on the altar
and only the meat is consumed.

SLIDE

I would argue that sacrifice is exactly where Jesus is steering the crowd.

John's gospel is particularly focused on a high Christology and atonement.

In other words, this gospel, more than the others,
focuses on this notion of Jesus being the incarnation of God
in human flesh,
and it's in John that we first hear Christ being referred to
as the "Lamb of God."

John's gospel stresses that it's through his sacrificial death
that we receive atonement and redemption.

Jesus is laying the groundwork for the salvation to come
through the crucifixion and resurrection.

In John, we don't have the same story of the Passover
and the initial communion meal.

This passage is the only one that refers the body and blood,
but as we have seen,
it is referenced in a much different context.

So what do we do with this language?

Well, certainly it lays out very clearly
the meaning and value of the crucifixion,

and the brutal reality of the sacraments of communion.

But I would also argue it lays out the importance of being fed.

Unlike the more generic depictions of the Eucharist,

this story makes the elements the real deal, flesh and blood.

Some of the early church traditions took this in a very literal sense,

that when the sacraments were blessed,

they became the literal body and blood of Christ.

While I respect those traditions,

I still think Jesus was talking in metaphors,

not meaning literal meat and blood.

But how much like the real food we eat in life should this spiritual meal be?

As I mentioned earlier, when we consume physical food,

our bodies change and absorb that food

and it becomes an integral part of us.

So what happens when we consume Christ?

Do we also change and absorb Christ so that he becomes like us?

Or is Jesus implying in our passage today

that something different occurs when we partake of his meal.

He intentionally pulls us away from the existing metaphor

of manna, from God being the bread of life, to himself.

He makes the point that what sustained us before eventually led to death,

not to life.

Unlike the food that sustains our physical body,

this food should transform and absorb us,
not the other way around.

Is Jesus changing you into something new,
or are you changing Jesus
to fit the way you've always been?

It's clear that the spiritual nourishment Christ offers
differs from what's come before.

Like in our text from Proverbs this morning,
the meal he provides should move us away from immaturity
to live and walk in Christ ways, the ways of wisdom,
the ways that lead to life.

As in our physical bodies, this new bread of life
should replace the old ways, and those ways should be discarded.

Are you seeking the right nourishment and is it moving you to be more like Jesus,
or are you just looking for what fits into who you are now?

And what about the community of faith?

Do we seek the nourishment that will change us,
or just what keeps us going as we always have?

SLIDE

I'll close today with a little story, if you'll excuse the pun, of food for thought.

There was a beggar who came and sat before a baker.

"I want bread," he said.

"How wise you are," the baker assured him.

"Bread is what you need. And you have come to the right bakery."

So he pulled his cookbook down from his shelf

and began to tell the beggar all he knew about bread.

He spoke of flour and wheat, of grain and barley.

The baker's knowledge impressed even himself

as he cited the measurements and recipe.

When he looked up, he was surprised to see that the beggar wasn't smiling.

"I just want bread," he said.

"How wise you are." The baker applauded his choice.

"Follow me, and I'll show you our bakery."

Down the hallowed halls he guided him,

pausing to point out the rooms where the dough is prepared

and the ovens where the bread is baked.

"No one has such facilities. We have bread for every need.

But here is the best part," he proclaimed

as he pushed open two swinging doors.

"This is our room of inspiration."

The baker knew the beggar was moved as they stepped into the auditorium

full of stained-glass windows.

The beggar didn't speak.

The baker understood his silence. With his arm around his shoulder,

he whispered, "It overwhelms me as well."

Then the baker leaped to the podium and struck his favorite pose behind the lectern. "People come from miles to hear me speak.

Once a week my workers gather,

and I read to them the recipe from the cookbook of life."

By now the beggar had taken a seat on the front row.

The baker knew what he wanted. "Would you like to hear me?"

"No," he said, "but I would like some bread."

"How wise you are," The baker replied.

And he led him to the front door of the bakery.

"What I have to say next is very important," he told him

as they stood outside.

"Up and down this street you will find many bakeries.

But take heed; they don't serve the true bread.

I know of one who adds two spoons of salt rather than one.

I know of another whose oven is three degrees too hot.

They may call it bread," the baker warned,

"but it's not according to the book."

The beggar turned and began walking away.

"Don't you want bread?" the baker asked him.

He stopped, looked back, and shrugged, "I guess I lost my appetite."

The baker shook his head and returned to his office.

"What a shame," he said to himself.

"The world just isn't hungry for true bread anymore."

SLIDE

So what do you think of that story? Are we the baker or the beggar?

Does our bakery provide bread that truly feeds the spiritual needs of others?

Or maybe we are looking for bread that doesn't meet our true needs.

This week let's give thought as to how we feed ourselves spiritually,

and think about whether we find ourselves transformed,

or whether we simply absorb it and discard it with no growth.

Likewise, let's think as a community, let's think about our product,

if what we're baking really feeds the needs of others,

or do we just offer the same old stale bread.

May God lead us to true nourishment. Amen.