

“Soul Food”

Psalm 111, John 6: 51-58

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost/B, August 19, 2012

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The Adult Faith Enrichment team (formally known as the Adult team for Discipleship Education) has been meeting to plot out offerings for the coming year. Such work is much like planting a garden. In the spring we start brainstorming. We come up with ideas, some we keep and some we toss. It is important to discern what captures the attention of the committee. If we are excited about something, we hope others will be excited too. We are currently putting together a configuration of small group activities, book discussions, guest speakers, dinners and movie nights. The theme we are exploring is “Feeding your Faith.”

This process feels a lot like plotting a garden for the first time. First, you survey the plot of land in the backyard. You envision peas and cucumbers and green peppers and tomatoes sprouting up. You visit the nursery and learn that only half of what you envision will work in that space. You revisit the vision with a more realistic understanding of the hours of shade and sunshine and the water requirements necessary to bring that produce to the table. You secure your plants, prepare the plot and put the seedlings in the ground. You are patient and flexible. Sometimes the green beans you think you planted turn out to be wax beans. (This has happened) Over time you pray that it is not too hot or too dry and that you remember to water the garden on a regular basis. Lastly, you must make the commitment to do the tedious work of pulling up weeds now and then.

There are many ways to feed one’s faith. Participating in meaningful worship is one way. Attending a dynamic book study is another. Becoming part of the weekly bible study is yet another. Joining a gleaning team feeds your faith. Being a youth advisor expands your soul! We invite you to consider how you might feed your faith this coming year. The adult enrichment opportunities may be a wonderful way to do that. Some may feel like an appetizer. Others might satisfy you like a sumptuous meal.

John has a lot to say about eating. Some of what we hear this morning sounds outrageous. For several weeks the lectionary has explored lessons from John’s gospel talking about Jesus being the bread of life, inviting us to feast on this bread and discerning what this means for Jesus’ disciples. Imagine members of the early church hearing that in order to become part of this movement they would need to eat his body and drink his blood. Did Jesus mean this literally? This is another way in which Jesus breaks away from his Jewish heritage. Jews hold to many food restrictions that prohibit even touching certain animals or their blood, let alone eating it. Inviting people to take and eat his body and blood would have sounded outrageous to most people. Many people in fact left the early Christian movement because they were afraid of what others might think of their practices. The scuttlebutt was that Christians practiced cannibalism. We hear these words in the context of communion and they make perfect sense to us. But Jesus had not

yet shared this ritual with the disciples. If Jesus is not advocating a cannibalistic lifestyle, then what is he talking about?

In John 6, Jesus alludes historically to the Israelites in the immediate post-Exodus days. As they proceeded on their journey, the people despaired over their wandering endlessly through the wilderness and longed for what they had in Egypt. They searched three days for drinkable water, only to find a bitter spring. They continued to travel and still could not find suitable food to eat. They were in search of the Promised Land, but this certainly was not it.

Eventually God provides a flaky substance that rains from heaven each morning, but it does not last. They ask; “what is it? Can we eat it? What does it taste like?” (Exod. 16:15) It is human nature to ask questions about what we eat. It is therefore not outrageous to wonder about the bread of life, the flesh and blood of Jesus which he says is “the living bread that came down from heaven.”

We hear these words eucharistically. The writer Paul Stroble invites us to think how we might understand these words in a broader context. The word *bread* can also stand for sustenance; in the Lord’s Prayer, our *daily bread* generally means “what we need for life.” *Flesh and blood* can also mean a vital, actual life. So Jesus’ bread of life is his own life, his own vitality. He gives us his life freely. He gives us grace for living. He gives us access to God, forgiveness of our sins, eternal life and much more.¹

The invitation therefore is to consume Jesus, to allow his very life to infuse our lives. We do not literally eat his flesh or drink his blood, but we commit ourselves fully to living in his Way. Jesus is not talking about a dabbling around the edges kind of spiritual experience. He invites us to jump in feet first, whole hog. I often wonder as we share communion in our “pass it along the pew” tradition if we do a disservice to Jesus. We offer a safe, neatly cut piece of bread and a precisely measured amount of grape juice and consider this communion with Christ. I love serving communion to Silver Lake campers. When the kids come forward to receive the bread and cup, many of them tear into the loaf and grab the biggest piece of bread they think they can get away with, usually with a smirk or giggle for good measure. Then they nearly dunk their whole hand into the cup soaking up as much juice as is possible in about three seconds. Dripping with delight they consume this soggy piece of heaven.

That is how we are to approach our discipleship, as if we are consuming a juice dripping, soggy piece of heaven. God wants us to embrace this relationship with enthusiasm, delight, and great joy. God invites us to cultivate a rich, intimate relationship with Jesus. John says when we take in Jesus-as-flesh-and-blood, he will abide in us and we will abide in him. *Abide* in this sense means literally to “stay at home,” or “to remain at home.” When Jesus talks about having this flesh and blood relationship with us, he’s talking about being at home in us, and us being at home in him. When we talk about being at home it means encouraging people to be completely themselves, completely comfortable, completely at ease where they are. This is what is behind the slogan we so often hear in

¹Paul Stroble, “Whose Casserole?” *Christian Century*, August 8, 2006 p. 17.

our UCC churches, “not matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” We anticipate getting to know the authentic you. Then, Jesus invites all of us to a deeper level of intimacy.

The invitation to go deeper ought to be thrilling. Why then does the thought intimidate us so? I believe many of us struggle with intimacy. Perhaps that is a result of living in our post modern society. We possess many electronic gadgets to be “connected” to each other and meanwhile, the incidents of depression and other mental illnesses seem to be on the rise. People feel more isolated on a personal level. We can reach out and touch someone electronically but we long to for someone to reach out and touch us. This is precisely the invitation we hear today. The church is the place where we can touch and be touched, where we can grow in our understanding of ourselves and discern the purpose God has for our lives. We are meant to be in relationship with others and as Christians, with Jesus as well. This is the place where we can see that relationship blossom and mature.

The writer and farmer Wendell Berry understood the blessings and consequences of our consumptive lifestyle and the imperative to live more mindfully in the world. He wrote, “I do not mean to suggest we live harmlessly and strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. The point is, when we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament; when we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration...in such desecration, we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.”² Christ does not intend for any of us to experience loneliness or want. He came so we might have abundant life, all of us, not just a select few. Jesus longs for us to be at home with one another, mindful of our connectedness, respectful of our relationships, excited to deepen those connections for the health and welfare of all people.

We all suffer from one kind of hunger or another. If you are hungry, eat—Jesus offers his very self as bread to fill us. If you are thirsty, drink, for Christ offers his own blood to quench our thirst. But he warns us, when you eat and drink you will be filled, you will be satisfied. Your life will change. If God dwells within you, fills you, how can you hate others? How can you be prejudiced against others, knowing that God dwells in them too? How can you turn away when you see injustice and pain, knowing that God came in human form to relieve that pain?

Christ invites us to feed our faith; mind, body and spirit. When we munch on Christ, taking him into our very being, we participate in his and our earthly and earthy, life-in-the-flesh. A life in Christ is invitational, incarnational and communal. As Christ’s disciples, we continually seek new ways to share that life with the world. He calls us to live as he lived in a world without limits or boundaries, a world defined by how much we are able to love, how gracious and forgiving we are able to be. You are what you eat. Bon appétit! May it be so. Amen

² Sharon R. Blezard, “We are What We Eat,” Stewardship of life.org, August 19, 2012.