

“Taste and Be”

Ephesians 5: 15-20, John 6: 51-58

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There is something special about potluck suppers. In the true spirit of hospitality, no one fusses about what is served. There is always something to satisfy one's appetite. A little of this, a little of that, a cup of something refreshing to drink, the chance to linger at the table, unhurried or bothered by the list of things you've left undone. When you come to a potluck supper you set aside those cares and worries to feast on the true offering of the day; the love and hospitality of Christ.

We don't come to potluck suppers to partake of fine cuisine. What we share is called comfort food. A potluck supper is not like the progressive dinners my parents hosted when I was a kid. Many of you may have fond memories of such events. I know my parents had certain friends who loved progressive dinners. Couples would travel from home to home sharing one course at each stop. Because each hostess was only responsible for one course, she could treat her guests to something extravagant. For example, if you were serving dessert it was the perfect opportunity to prepare something truly decadent. Like so many things our parents enjoyed, progressive dinners seem to be a lost form of hospitality.

Why is table fellowship so important? What is the attraction to potluck suppers and progressive dinners? Eating together, whether with good friends or family is not only integral to our life of faith; it is essential for maintaining strong and healthy families. Studies chronicle the importance of families sharing meals together around the dinner table. The location of the table is not as important as sitting down together, without the television as competition and catching up with one another. Families that gather together at least once a day, for both food and fellowship, report a stronger sense of well being and connection. Parents who know their children's friends, who welcome them to their table, have children who are less likely to engage in risky behaviors, more likely to talk to their parents when they are confused or troubled, more able to make responsible decisions.

Feasting at the table is essential to maintain a healthy balance in all aspects of our lives. For several weeks the gospel writer John has used the metaphor of bread to talk about Jesus. Today's lesson records the first of Jesus' I AM statements; "I am the bread of life." In our "carb conscious" society, bread seems to have lost its former appeal. What significance does bread have in your life? Does it make any difference when Jesus says; "I am the living bread that came down from heaven? If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

The people who first heard Jesus talk like this were confused. The metaphors John uses and declarations Jesus makes about himself don't seem outrageous to modern Christians who realize Jesus is talking about communion. We understand he does not intend for us to eat his flesh or drink his blood. However, there were many early Christians who were

persecuted and martyred because nonbelievers found this language repulsive. In fact, some people thought early Christians engaged in the practice of cannibalism. We can see how ridiculous this may seem, but in the early days of the church, this was a real concern.

Jesus never intended to suggest that we literally eat his flesh or drink his blood. However, John intentionally uses the word *flesh*. He distinguishes himself from the other gospel writers by using flesh instead of body. He does this to make an important point. John understood we do more than ingest a piece of bread and a dribble of juice whenever we feast at Christ's table. The power of communion is not in the elements themselves, but in the effect this sacrament has on our lives. It symbolizes the sacrifice Jesus made for us, giving his very self, his body and blood, for our sins. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice to fulfill God's will and every time we celebrate this meal we do so in remembrance of him. How then do you approach communion? What happens to you as you prepare to receive the elements, as you hear the invitation to take and eat? I invite us to reflect on those two questions for just a moment.

How we understand communion depends on many things. What are your earliest memories of communion? What were you taught about communion? Was it something solemn and somber or something more celebratory, filled with grace, forgiveness and the possibility of new life? How was the meal consecrated? Who was invited to the table and how old did you have to be what did you have to do to receive? As we come to the table, we bring all these memories with us.

Like the bread that is transformed into the body of Christ and the cup that promises the new covenant in Christ's name, our understanding and appreciation for communion can be transformed over time. In John's gospel, Jesus uses the word flesh many times. John wrote at the end of the first century. One of the reasons early Christians shared Eucharist at the common table using every day elements was to hide in plain sight what they were doing. In this way, what they did fed their lives every day. It was not something mystical or mysterious. Just as Jesus consecrated the bread at the table with his friends, we continue that tradition by sharing this meal with all those who choose to follow Christ, in plain sight, with great joy and thanksgiving.

It was crucial that the early church understand that Jesus was not only the Son of God, but also a living, breathing man who came to be among them, as one of them, in the flesh just like them. John says that Jesus abides in us, becomes one with us, dwells in us. That is what happens when we eat the bread and drink from the cup of blessing. Each time we gather at the table, we reestablish this relationship. When we share the bread and cup we renew our covenant with Jesus, we give thanks to God for instituting this covenant within and among us and then recommit ourselves to live as Jesus lived, to do as Jesus did, to taste and be!

Jesus invites us to taste and be, to understand that when we accept Christ into our lives, he makes himself at home within and among us. Participation in Christ, is participation in his and our earthly and earthy, life-in-the-flesh. A life in Christ is invitation, incarnational and communal. As disciples of Christ, we then share that life with the

world. Jesus calls us to live as he lived in a world without limits or boundaries, a world defined only by how much we are able to love, how gracious and forgiving we are able to be. It is by making Jesus so integral to who we are, just as food nourishes us and becomes part of us, that we will indeed live abundantly and as Jesus promises, eternally.

Eternal life is not something we hope to experience once our earthly life is complete. Eternal life as John understands it is a present reality, a way of being in the world, nourished at the table of life. What we receive when we celebrate communion does not create intimacy with Jesus; it is a reflection of it. Life in communion with Jesus is not confined to a few moments the first Sunday of the month in worship, but it is a morning 'til evening, every waking moment feeding on the One who gives us his very self upon which to feed.

Communion with Christ has always been a mark of a follower of Jesus. Would your understanding of "discipleship" change if you thought of communion as more than a "going to" or "taking of" something that begins and ends in this particular sanctuary? Communion is more than sharing consecrated elements; it is sharing consecrated lives. Even when young children know nothing of the proper ritual or etiquette for receiving communion, they understand that communion is a way to share Christ's love and that one's love for Jesus is sufficient enough to receive. Even when a person has lost almost all-cognitive ability there is a place within them that responds to communion. As they receive the bread and cup, memories flood through a window in the soul, and they too can still taste and be.

To feed on Christ all the days of my life is to be in communion with Christ all the days of my life. That relationship has its ups and downs. I am more faithful or less faithful on any given day. I am compassionate or less compassionate, forgiving or less forgiving, as I am in greater or lesser communion with Christ. Thankfully and graciously Jesus never abandons me, even when I try to shut him out. I am so grateful that with sufficient regularity, Jesus calls me back to the table and never fails to welcome me into his loving arms. He calls me to set aside my worries, to let go of all bitterness and anger, to see each day as a new beginning, and a chance to recommit myself to him.

Rev. Beth Quick wonders if we consume Jesus' flesh, take in his blood, so that his life is in us, within us, what happens to our own lives? Jesus tells us the answer. "This is the bread that came down from heaven," he says, "not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." This life that Jesus promises is not life that we have to wait for. The eternal life that Jesus speaks of begins today, begins now, as soon as we feast on the bread of life. As soon as we fill ourselves with God, letting God abide within us, our real life can begin. With Christ-filled selves, our lives change.

We all suffer from one kind of spiritual hunger or another. If you are hungry, eat - Jesus offers his own 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. For 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 our pain?

I am the bread of life, says Jesus. In this world full of troubles, challenges and dangers, it is my hope and prayer that God may give us grace and strength to be in communion with Christ. The bread upon which we are to feast is more than the manna that fed our ancestors for a day. This is the bread of life that will feed us forever. May it be so!  
Amen