

“You Are How You Eat”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
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Scripture: Isaiah 55, Luke 9:12-27

Cookbooks, food planners, exercise gurus, and a television show all proclaim, “you are what you eat.” For those who spent multiple days at the State Fair recently trying to sample every kind of food on a stick, the slogan “you are what you eat” might strike fear.

But in our day as we begin to realize that years and years of changing diets and less exercise are leading to what can fairly be called an epidemic of obesity – we need to encourage healthy eating. If you eat healthy foods, you are more likely to live a healthy life. There is truth in the saying, “You are what you eat.” I am pleased to hear politicians like Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee and former President Bill Clinton realizing that they are an example, and losing weight, and encouraging others to do so and encouraging healthy public policies. And I am so glad that our gourmet chef Barb Westman takes a healthy diet very seriously as she plans our Wednesday and 3rd Sunday lunches.

But anyone who has ever attempted to go on a diet knows that it is not that easy to simply change your eating patterns. How we eat is deeply engrained in our habits, our work, our emotions, and our families.

A few weeks ago in her sermon “food fights,” Camille said, “food is central to our lives. It shapes our daily routines, our social calendars, our business meetings, and our relationships.”ⁱ And food is central to the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament, meals and food are very important. The Passover meal is set out in great detail for us to remember that pivotal saving moment when God led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Many of the laws laid out have to do with diet and how to eat. Some make it clear that animals are to be treated humanely. Other laws insist that the land should be treated with care – so family farms can sustain generations. Food is not just part of human daily existence in the Hebrew Scriptures, but a key place where human needs and divine goodness intersect.

And our passages today from the prophet Isaiah and the gospel of Luke take us into a strange world where those with no money are urged to come, buy, and eat (Isaiah 55:1). Where a few loaves and a few fish are enough to feed thousands. And these stories are in keeping with the ministry and parables of Jesus that featured banquets that would rival opening night for Harry Potter at Hogwarts, with a strange assortment of dinner companions, where food seems to magically appear, and everyone is dressed in their finest.

In his book, New Testament Hospitality, Bible Scholar John Koenig writes, The collective presence of these companions, especially at meals, caused a number of good upstanding people to regard Jesus’ ministry as something immoral. For Jesus himself, however, the gatherings of his diverse friends called for joy and feasting . . . In

short, what his critics called excess, he experienced and proclaimed as God's good news. . . For in Jesus' experience God not only provides the material necessities for all people but now, in a special way, comes near to offer something of incalculable richness called "the kingdom."ⁱⁱⁱ

To steal a phrase from our neighbor Lynne Rossetto Kasper heard on Minnesota Public Radio, when Jesus is around, every meal is worthy of a "splendid table."

The only miracle story that appears in each of the four gospels is the story of Jesus feeding of the five thousand.ⁱⁱⁱ It is a fascinating story – as, I guess, all miracles are.

This passage follows directly on our passage from last week, in which Jesus sends the disciples out to proclaim the good news and heal the sick while bringing no extra clothes, or food, or money for the journey. When they return to tell Jesus about what had happened on their journeys, a crowd had gathered behind them. The crowds had followed Jesus and the twelve to a deserted place, but the day was drawing to a close. So the twelve, the disciples, came to Jesus and basically said that it was time to adjourn – send the crowd away so they can go into the nearby villages and find a place to stay and get a good meal. A very reasonable request. But Jesus would have none of it. Instead, Jesus says, "You give them something to eat."

"We have no more than five loaves and two fish – unless you want us to go into town and buy food for everyone."

Even after the twelve had been sent out – told to proclaim the good news and take nothing with them but the clothes on their back and a desire for hospitality, they couldn't get the old way of thinking out of their heads. "You give them something to eat," Jesus tells them. And they say that they do not have enough to share.

It is after all, a rather understandable response. We only have a little bit – why should we share? If you extend that line of thinking, you can hear echoes perhaps of our own thinking: What good would it do to make a small offering? We aren't rich. So much can be justified along these lines of comparing our wealth to the people we read about or see on television. I don't have much, I mean, it's not as if we live in a mansion like so and so. We are so mired in our culture's doctrine of scarcity that we cannot rid ourselves of the thought that there isn't enough to go around – not enough food, land, money -- there isn't enough to go around so why bother sharing anything at all? The doctrine of scarcity has a deep hold on our generosity and it even permeated the views of the twelve, the ones who were closest to the human Jesus of Nazareth. We don't have enough to share, they said. But Jesus had a better answer.

In a few weeks, On October 10th, we will be having a party and adult education forum to celebrate Macalester Professor Paula Cooley's newly published book Willing the Good. In it, she writes,

the people who are still in charge suffer an impoverishment of the imagination regarding what we hope for as good on a number of fronts. Among them, we often seek it only for ourselves or for those most immediately related to us.^{iv}

And she describes our post 9/11 context as one in which American Christians have become so fearful of terror, and fearful of uncertainty that our fear has become a partner to greed. And this fear “prevents the possibility of identifying one’s own interests with those most vulnerable.”^v

The disciples weren’t that different from how we might react. “Send the crowd away.” Let them get their own food. “We have no more than five loaves and two fish.” And to all those justifications, Jesus says, “give them something to eat.” And so they did, and after Jesus blessed the food and broke it, everyone had more than enough to eat, so much so that twelve baskets of leftovers were collected.

Instead of looking at everything in fear that it is scarce, that it will run out, Jesus teaches us to look at life filled with an abundance of goodness, an abundance of grace. John Koenig writes that it wasn’t enough for Jesus to simply try and tell people about this abundance of God’s goodness.

Jesus’ conviction that with the coming near of God’s abundance in the kingdom new modes of sharing have become possible, and indeed normative. . . With God there is more than enough food and home, but this truth must be acted out in its proclamation before people can respond to it with faith.^{vi}

Jesus could not just say that there will be enough food for all; he had to act it out. Now I know what some of you are thinking. People often ask how it exactly happened – how did the five loaves and two fish become enough food to feed 5,000 men? Matthew’s gospel quickly adds, not to mention all the women and children as well (Matthew 14:21)! The gospel of John tells this miracle story with a small difference. In John, the disciples don’t have any food, but one of them notices that a young boy in the crowd has the bread and fish and they distribute that. Despite the differences, all the gospels marvel at this story. And I must admit that I don’t know exactly how Jesus multiplied the little food into enough to feed the thousands. Some argue that the gospel writers, writing some fifty years after the death of Jesus, created a miracle story to explain the celebration of communion.

Koenig says that this is probably not just a literary invention by the writers of the gospels to explain why the early Christians celebrated communion.

Far more likely is the hypothesis that it represents an embellished account of a real meal which was felt to be extraordinary because large numbers of people participated, because some form of abundance occurred, and because Jesus was seen in the role of host.^{vii}

But what actually happened? I don’t know. Perhaps, as in the gospel of John, it took a child to start the sharing, and then others started taking the food they had brought but had kept hidden, sharing with those around them. When you trust that there is enough, you can share what you have. Generosity has a way of multiplying gifts.

I believe it is no accident that this miracle healing story is placed next to a question of Jesus’ identity. Immediately following the feeding, Jesus asks the disciples, “who do the crowds say that I am.” You see, for Jesus – his identity, the generous nature of God, an abundant kingdom closer than the eye can see are all linked together as one.

More important than what you eat, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is about how you eat. “It seems clear that Jesus’ persistent attention to food, drink, and hospitality is intended to convey something important about the reciprocal relationship between God and human beings. Behind Jesus’ imagery is the magnanimous God, who constantly grants far more than humans need or deserve.”^{viii}

And so our Third Sunday lunches are more than a monthly add-on to our schedule. They are more than a chance to gather and eat fine food. These lunches are deeply rooted in the biblical vision of a community created to enjoy and celebrate an abundant God. With healthy food, enough for all, with a spot at the table available for everyone. And like it was two thousand years ago, in these meals a company of strangers becomes a community of disciples in the breaking of the bread and eating together. We are how we eat.

As the Psalmist says, O taste and see that the Lord is good (Psalm 34:8). Amen.

ⁱ Sermon preached by Rev. Camille L. Cook, “Food Fights,” at Central Presbyterian Church.
www.cpcstpaul.org/sermons.html

ⁱⁱ John Koenig, New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 26-27.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, 28. This story appears in Mark 6:30-44, Matthew 14:13-21, Luke 9:11-17, and John 6:5-13.

^{iv} Paula Coeey, Willing the Good: Jesus, Dissent, and Desire (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) 9.

^v Ibid, 17-20.

^{vi} Koenig, 36.

^{vii} Ibid, 28.

^{viii} Ibid, 28-29.