

Eating God

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, 11 August 2024

1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

I wonder what's the best thing you've ever eaten. Maybe we need to do a bit of parsing here and ask the timeless question: sweet or savory?

A couple weeks ago I had to make this nerve-racking decision for breakfast at a crepe joint in Keystone, Colorado. Do I go with the crepe with bacon, eggs, cheese, tots, and hot sauce? Or do I eat the crepe with bananas, chocolate, peanut butter, and maple syrup?

Or maybe it's not about savory or sweet for you at all. Maybe the best food for you is all about nutrition. Or something that doesn't set off your allergies. Or maybe the best food is something reminiscent, like your grandma's biscuits and gravy loaded with sausage and homemade jam. I wonder, what's the best thing you've ever eaten?

Today we find ourselves camped out in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel. This is our third week studying John 6, and we're only halfway through. We still get to hear from Rick next week and then Aly the following week as we bring our reading of John 6 to a close.

That the lectionary parks us at John 6 for five weeks indicates the significance of this passage for matters of faith and salvation. This is John's version of the Institution of the Lord's Supper, or Communion. And today, we find ourselves in the middle of what's been called the Bread of Life Discourse. Today Jesus claims to be the Bread of Life. I AM, Jesus says, the Bread of Life. You'll remember the declarative I AM from the famous burning bush of Exodus 3 and John, the writer of our Gospel, is milking this self-identification for all it's worth. Jesus is I AM, and today he offers more content for what it means to be the great I AM. Today we learn that the great I AM, God, is the Bread of Life.

That God offers God's self to be eaten should not be lost on us. What I'd like to suggest today is that Jesus invites his disciples, Jesus invites us, to eat *God*. I'm not trying to be any more dramatic or controversial than Jesus was, or than the truth is, and so I'd like for us to consider what it might mean for us to be people who eat God, constantly. I'd like to make three observations along the way. First, eating God is far better than you can imagine. Second, eating God empowers us for life with God. And finally, eating God makes us like God.

To understand just how good eating God truly is, let's consider the complaint from the Jews. In verse 41 the Jews complain about Jesus because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." The Jews are talking about manna here. You'll remember that manna was God's miraculous provision for a hungry Israel wandering around the wilderness. Last week Kathy read the passage from Exodus 16 that recounted the Israelite's complaining in the wilderness. God's response to Moses was, "I am going to rain bread from heaven for you" (Ex 16:4). When we prayed Psalm 78 last week, it described this manna, this bread from heaven, in the most poetic of ways: "he commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven; he rained down on

them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. Mortals ate of the bread of angels; he sent them food in abundance” (Ps 78:23-25). Grain of heaven. Food in abundance. *Mortals ate the bread of angels*. I love that: *mortals ate the bread of angels*. Elijah being provided with cake from the angel is meant to remind us of manna, angel’s food that God provided the Israelites.

So when the Jews complain today, they’re imitating their ancestors in the wilderness. They’re complaining that Jesus is claiming to be manna, the bread from heaven that God provided in abundance. But this is not Jesus’s claim at all. Jesus is better than manna. Jesus is offering God’s very self, which never runs out and there’s always enough for everyone, forever. If manna is the bread of angels, the eucharist is the body of God. Communion is far better than manna because in Communion, we receive the body of Christ. Communion is, without comparison, the very best we can ever eat. Communion is all the things: savory, sweet, nutritious, allergy free, reminiscent, and much more: nourishing, sustaining, empowering, and transforming. In Communion, we eat God. The Psalmist invites us, “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8).

My second observation about what it might mean for us to be people who eat God is that Communion empowers us for life with God. We get a sense of this empowerment, and the life Christ makes possible in the letter to the Ephesians. There’s so much good to be said about our lesson today, but what I’d most like to focus on is the way in which Christ makes possible a new way of living. This is what Paul is getting at in chapter four and in our reading today about “putting away falsehood.” What if, in this time of conspiracy theories and political antagonism, we were a people that spoke truth. Not speaking truth in a domineering, aggressive kind of way, but as Paul describes it here in Ephesians.

Listen to how Paul describes this new way of living Christ makes possible. “Don’t make room for the devil.” Stop stealing. Work honestly and share with others. Don’t speak evil, but instead, build up the faithful. Stop being bitter and angry. Stop slandering and brawling. Stop being malicious. Instead, be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. We can do all this, Paul says, because God in Christ has forgiven us and, seen alongside today’s passages, we can also add that we can be different because God has given us God’s self. We can live differently because we have new life in and sustained by Christ. We can “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love” because we have been converted and transformed by the Bread of Life.

John Wesley described Communion as a “converting ordinance,” the “grand channel” for receiving God’s grace. In his sermon “On the Duty of Constant Communion,” Wesley encouraged Christians to receive Communion as often as they can because Communion changes us. Wesley himself reported receiving Communion a few times a week. When I was ordained a Free Methodist pastor, I took vows to receive Communion as often as it is offered to me. Communion is more about God and what God is doing in us than about you or your state of mind because in Communion we receive Christ. As we receive the body of Christ, as often as we can, God gives us what we need to be people of confession, forgiveness, reconciliation, and love. God gives us God’s very self. “Taste and see that the Lord is good.”

In Communion, we become what we eat. This is my final observation as we reflect on how Jesus offers us his very self so that we might become like God. Wesleyans like to talk about holiness and Christian perfection, and rightly so. The idea of Christian perfection is that we might be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect, as Jesus teaches in the sermon on the mount. As Wesley understood it, Christian perfection and entire sanctification names the way in which God makes us full of love for God, neighbor and self. Christian perfection is being full of love, just as Jesus was full of love.

When we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, we become what we eat. In Communion we become Christ's body mystically and mysteriously, refashioned by the grace of God for the sake of the world. As I noted in my eLetter to the church earlier this week, when celebrating Communion St. Augustine famously pronounced, "Behold! The body of Christ! Now become what you are!" What Augustine helps us see is that through Communion, Christ offers us his body as he makes us his body.

So Communion is far better than you can imagine, better than manna. Communion empowers us for new life with God and transforms us into Christ's body in our time and context. Communion is far better than we can imagine because in Communion we eat *God*. I love quoting St. Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, who lived in the first century, who called the eucharist the "medicine of immortality, that antidote to death." Communion is the medicine of immortality and the antidote to death because when we receive Communion, we receive Christ who is the Bread of Life. With Christ in us, how could death undo us?

And that's not all. In our constant reception of Communion we practice the mystery of God with us. Just as God condescended by becoming a baby in a manger long ago, so also God condescends every single time we celebrate Communion by becoming bread and wine to be consumed. The mystery and marvel of the Incarnation continues in the reality and renewal of Communion.

Wesley was right, Augustine was right, and Ignatius was right because they took seriously the Word of God, who was made flesh and dwelled among us. Today the Word of God, Jesus the Christ, invites us to eat his flesh and drink his blood so that we will never be hungry or thirsty again.

As the Bread of Life, Jesus makes God accessible to every single one of us. All we need to receive Christ is eat or drink. You don't need to pass the test, or say the right thing, or convince anyone, including yourself, of your worthiness. All you need to do is accept the invitation to come and receive Christ and let God begin (or continue) fitting you for life with God for ever.

Today Jesus offers us a life far beyond the abundant manna God provided in the wilderness. Today Jesus offers us the food we need to live a new life. Today Jesus offers us God's very self so that we might become people fit for friendship with God forever. In Communion, we eat God. Taste and see that the Lord is good. What could be better?