

August 11, 2024 Prpr 14 Bon Appetite

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This might not be the best sermon to read if you skipped a meal, because this sermon is about food and sharing meals together. My intention is not to make you suffer or make your tummy rumble. Instead, I want to invite you to consider how often eating appears in the Bible, and to share what the French refer to as *bon appetite*, a good appetite – one for good food, good friends and family, and a good life.

It starts in the beginning, the very beginning, in the book Genesis. After God made the world and everything in it, in the second version of creation, God spoke to the first man and in that first conversation God told the first man what he could eat in the Garden of Eden. It seems God created humanity to participate in the world God made and enjoy it, which means depending on the earth to give us what our bodies need to be healthy, to have energy so we can do what we need to do. Perhaps it was God's hope that if we realized God made us to depend on the earth for our survival, we'd be inclined to care for it and respect it. While it probably wasn't the first meal humans ate, the meal that is first mentioned is the one where the first man and woman chose to eat fruit from the tree God said was off limits. And when they blamed God for their choice, a rift began in humanity's relationship with God.

But that is far from the end of the story, and there are many more meals mentioned in the Bible, meals that appear to attempt to restore that relationship. And after the Garden, meals throughout the rest of the Bible seem to be about something more meaningful than eating what we are supposed to eat. Several commentators and Biblical scholars have observed meals in the Bible, whether they are simple or elaborate often represent the promises God makes to God's people.

There are a lot of examples, and I am not going to mention them all today, but I am going to mention a few to help us recognize their importance, because that will hopefully help us understand what Jesus is getting at in the Gospel when he calls himself the Bread of Life.

There are many significant meals in the Book Genesis. One is the elaborate feast Joseph – the guy who had the gift to interpret dreams, who was his father's favorite son and his brothers sold him into slavery out of jealousy, who eventually became Pharaoh's right-hand man – he gave a feast for his brothers who had come looking for help because a year's long draught left them starving. Even though they did not recognize him, Joseph not only gave them food to take back home, he invited them to an elaborate feast, where after some drama – there was a lot of drama in those families in Genesis – he revealed himself. He forgave his brothers, and there was not only reunion, there was reconciliation, and the family came together again.

Perhaps the most well-known meal in the Old Testament is in Exodus, the meal the people of Israel shared the night the angel of death passed over them in Egypt before Pharaoh released them from a life of slavery. To this day the Passover is a significant Jewish holiday, and it centers around a meal remembering how God is with God's people and saves God's people. Later in Exodus, when the people were unable to find food for themselves in the wilderness, God provided them with meals by sending them breakfast and dinner every day in the form of manna in the morning and quails in the evening, caring for the people the way God cared for the needs of the first man and woman in the Garden, and saved them not only from slavery but starvation.

Speaking of salvation, after days of fasting and prayer, it was at a feast that lasted several days where Queen Esther exposed Haman's intentions to commit genocide on her people, the Jewish people. Her husband the King then punished Haman by taking his life, giving us another story of how a meal played a role in God saving God's people.

Psalm 23 speaks of the Lord setting a table, providing a meal, even in the midst of enemies or in times of suffering. Today's first lesson is a good example of this. Things were not going well for the prophet Elijah, yet in his state of physical, mental, and spiritual exhaustion, God provided him with food so he could rest, restoring him to wholeness so that he could move on, return to the path God wanted him to take, and continue his difficult work. It is not easy being a prophet.

We might recognize that while all these meals met the biological necessity that people need food to stay alive, they were also a means for forgiveness, reconciliation, renewal, redemption, reminders of God's presence and connection to food, and God's saving acts. All the stuff of a deeper kind of life. The kind of Life that comes from God, and the Life Jesus embodies.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus appeared to be fond of meals and participated in a lot of them. His first miracle in John's Gospel was at a wedding feast in Cana, where he miraculously made the best wine after they ran out. One of the most common complaints Jesus' critics had about him was he spent too much time eating with people, especially the wrong kind of people. Many of Jesus' parables that describe or mention the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven involve banquets or feasts, like the one the father of the prodigal son gave when his wayward son returned home.

One of Jesus' most well-known miracles involves food, when he fed thousands with just a few loaves of bread and fish, and everyone ate their fill; the same thousands that Jesus was talking to in today's Gospel, trying to reveal to them who and what he really is. When we consider how significant meals are in the Bible, how they represent the promise God made to always be with us, even when we make mistakes, even when we are exhausted, even when we are frightened or don't know what to do, when things look hopeless, God is still with us. Not only in providing what we need by creating a world that will produce the foods we need and enjoy, but by restoring us to a good relationship with God because God loves us that much.

This is what Jesus is referring to when he calls himself the Bread of Life. Obviously, Jesus does not think he is a sort of gingerbread man or loaf of whole grain bread. That is good news when so many people suffer from gluten intolerance or diseases like diabetes where the sugars and carbohydrates in bread are not life giving. Literal food will not last. It won't satisfy forever. We'll always be hungry again, even after eating the most expensive, delicious, well-prepared meal.

In calling himself the Bread of Life, Jesus is referring to something deeper that won't go through us or wear off: he is talking about the salvation he brings in God's forgiveness, restoration to God and each other, and new life, the resurrection life we all can receive and share.

Today's Gospel might also remind us of the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night before his arrest, trial, death, and resurrection. While called the Last Supper, it was not the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples. After his resurrection, one of the ways the Risen Jesus was recognized by his disciples is when he shared a meal with them, like the people he encountered on the road to Emmaus, and the fish he shared with his disciples on the beach after they came back from fishing. That is the meal where the Risen Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him, echoing the three times Peter denied him, a sign of forgiveness that at the same time commissioned Peter with a new life. It was time to put away his fishing nets for good and go out and tell others about the Risen Christ, the Bread of Life that gives life to us all. Life that we can share, and discover like those loaves and fish, the more we share, the more there seems to be. Life that fulfills, forgives, renews, heals, and draws us closer to God, each other, and the earth that God made.

The next time we share a meal, whether it is a quiet breakfast with a spouse, a celebration meal at a restaurant or big family cookout, lunch with a friend in person or over zoom, a pot luck after Evensong, or even enjoying refreshments at coffee hour, in addition to delicious food, that among the fellowship, gossip, complaints, storytelling, catching up, and listening, that happens, I hope you will remember God

is present. While not quite the same as in the sacrament of Holy Communion, receiving Holy Communion can help us recognize how at mealtime God is in our midst through the food made with love and care from recipes of loved ones who might not be with us any longer, or are far away, or from food lovingly grown and harvested by hand, through our love for each other, and in ways we might not yet recognize. Each meal, no matter how simple or elaborate, is about more than satisfying our physical appetite, is a chance to be nourished by the stuff of eternal life, the good stuff God gave us an appetite for: the Bread of Life, the stuff of eternal life: forgiveness, reconciliation, renewal, and all aspects of God's love.

Bon Appetit.