

You Are What You Eat

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

It's kind of funny how certain random childhood memories can be recalled in distinct detail many decades later, when some days I'm lucky if I remember what I had for breakfast. Like a memory I still have of a conversation with my Portuguese Vavo (grandmother). I couldn't have been more than seven or eight years old. Yet I remember her words as clearly as if they were spoken to me this morning. I can't say the same for the circumstances that provoked this conversation, but it's not too difficult to deduce that she was trying to convince me to eat something I didn't want to eat. Clearly, that something was some red meat that she had put on my plate.

She said, "Once there were three brothers. One would eat only chicken, the second one ate only pork, and the third brother ate only beef. The boy who only ate chicken grew up to be scrawny and weak. The one who ate only pork grew up to be obese. But the brother who ate beef grew up to be strong and muscular." Then she asked me which of the brothers I wanted to grow up to be like.

I was too young then to grasp the concept of hyperbole; yet I sensed that this was no factual family history she was describing to me. It was more like a parable, replete with the extreme exaggeration needed to make a point and not meant to be taken literally. The obvious moral of her little fable was, "Be thoughtful about what foods you put into your body, because you are what you eat...so trust me and eat what I put on your plate."

Our Gospel reading today is Jesus' "You are what you eat" message. And, I have to say, it's a little hard to hear, (to say the least) because the diet he seems to be promoting sounds suspiciously like cannibalism. I'll bet that Jesus' words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood made a few of *you* squirm in your beach chairs this morning, right? Don't feel bad. Just a few verses farther into this chapter of John's Gospel, it is written that even some of Jesus' own disciples were so disturbed by what he said, that they parted company with him over it. But let's not repeat their mistake of taking Jesus' words *literally* and instead let us learn from them. Indeed, be *fed* by them.

The fact is, a common theme of the Gospel readings contained in this sermon series on "Nourished by the Bread of Life" is Jesus using highly symbolic language. After Jesus fed five thousand people with a few loaves of bread, they followed him. When they found him, he told them that they were looking for him because they were hoping he would feed them once again. But he encouraged them not to strive for food that perished, but for "the food that endures for eternal life." Jesus didn't mean physical bread for the body, but with no expiration date on the package. He was talking about something that nourishes us spiritually. And when he said to them, "*I am* the Bread of Life", he didn't mean that he was like the Sunbeam Bread Girl; a

mascot representing some bakery whose product he is trying to sell. He meant that he is the source to go to if you are hoping to experience a dimension of living that transcends what the world can offer, while offering the world the hope of transformation into the fullness of what God created the world to be. Those were his ways of explaining the “what” and the “who” questions that people asked regarding the Bread of Heaven. *What* is it? And *Who* are you to tell us what it is?

Today, we have heard the answer of *How* to experience the Bread of Heaven. Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood will have eternal life.” As with the two previous sayings concerning Heavenly Bread, he was using a physical reality to explain a spiritual one. It’s Jesus’ “you are what you eat” message for the soul. Like my vavo’s advice about eating my way to good or bad *physical* health, Jesus lays out an “eat this, not that” program for achieving *spiritual* wellbeing. They both point to a well-known fact of human physiology to make their point. Which is that whatever we put into our body becomes part of who we are. According to Vavo, if you eat chicken, you will look like a chicken. Eat beef and you will be strong like a bull.

Jesus said, “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in them.” To abide someplace is to make your home there. It is to become one with that place. To be identified with it. So, those who believe in Jesus, who make their home in their relationship to him, will find that Jesus dwells in them. Like the way the food we eat abides in us by becoming integrated with who we are. When Jesus said earlier that we must choose between food that is perishable and food that lasts for eternity, he was inviting us to distinguish between the experiences in life that offer fleeting rewards and the experiences that are of eternal significance.

Picture that old time diagram of the Food Pyramid. At the bottom of the Pyramid, which covers the most area and provides the strong foundation, are all the foods that are best for us. Those are the things that should be the main staples of our bodily consumption. As you progress up the Pyramid, it gets narrower; and the foods represented there are correspondingly less recommended for a healthy diet. Until you reach the smallest section at the pinnacle of the Pyramid; which is where you find the things like sugars, fats, and oils. Which are ideally the least consumed foods. But willpower being what it is, unless we are purposefully intentional about what we put into our bodies, most of our diets flip that Pyramid upside down.

The same holds true for what we feed our souls. Life provides a smorgasbord of activities and experiences. Some build strong character. Many are like junk food. The goal of a Christian ought to be having the wisdom and discernment to choose as the foundation of our Life Experience Pyramid, that which will help us to grow and mature in our relationship to Jesus. The Apostle Paul warned the Christians in Ephesus to, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.” Then he goes on to dish out some “eat this, not that” advice.

“Do not be foolish. But understand what the will of the Lord is.”

“Do not get drunk on wine. But be filled with the Spirit.”

Do you see what he's doing there? How he's setting up a kind of Pyramid to describe what a Christian life can look like. It's not a life that is lived randomly, reactively and impulsively; without a center to guide you; but instead seeks to discern God's will for your life. It's not a life of indulging in excesses that distort your judgment; like getting intoxicated. It is a life of being filled with the Spirit so that you can see and respond to the world the way that God does.

He even offers the menu for becoming a Spirit filled person. Again, not in literal food, but in experiences that nourish our souls and better who we are. He says, "Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs *among yourselves*." So, that part of the menu is what we do together when we join in worship.

Then he adds, "singing and making melody to the Lord *in your hearts*, giving thanks to God at *all times and for everything*, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." That means there's a place on this Pyramid to be nourished by the Bread of Heaven, not only by what we do *together in worship*, but equally so, what we do as *individuals in our private spiritual lives*.

Our souls are nourished by Heavenly Bread, both when we are eating out together (like this), and when we are taking a meal in solitude. We need a balanced diet if we are to grow to fulfill the potential for which God created us. And the sooner we get on that food plan, and the more faithful we are at following it, the better.

Paul attached a sense of urgency to his spiritual food plan, reminding us that it is imperative to make the most of the time we have because "the days are evil." That phrase can also be translated as, "the days are urgent." These certainly are urgent times, aren't they? Just when we thought we were out of the COVID woods, the virus is making a resurgence. Just this week, the U.N. issued a Code Red for humanity based on the irreversible tipping point we are approaching with respect to climate change. Both of these crises could have been lessened or even averted if different options had been taken along the way, through responsible social policies and personal choices.

In a way, my vavo was right. We are what we eat. Who do we want to grow up to be like? What do we want this world that we leave to our children to be like? What choices are we willing to make to reach those goals? What reordering of our priorities? May we choose to be nourished by the Bread that came down from Heaven in Jesus, that we might grow more and more into his likeness. And through us, may this world grow more and more to resemble the Kingdom of God, for which he gave his life. Amen.

© 2021 Raymond Medeiros

(Sermon #3 in the "Nourished by the Bread of Life Series")

Preached at FCCW on August 15, 2021