

August 19, 2012

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

John 6:51-58

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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The old adage says, "you are what you eat." Some days, I'm okay with that: salads, yogurt, fruit. Those are the days I make good choices about what I put into my body. I'd be happy to "be" healthy foods, those things that make me feel strong and satisfied.

There are other days, of course, days when I'm stressed out or moving too fast. Those days I conveniently forget that I am what I eat: pizza, extra cheese on my nachos, half a box of Girl Scout cookies. I usually pay for it when I feel sluggish and unmotivated, not to mention disappointed in myself for my bad choices.

This morning, we have the fourth of five Gospel readings in a row about bread. The second of our three-year lectionary cycle, Year B, has this five week run of John where Jesus reminds us over and over again that he is the Bread of Life. While this could be construed as a *little bit* over the top (five weeks!), it does drive home Jesus' emphasis on community, fulfillment, and following God's commandments. This bread was not a whim or a suggestion, this was central for Jesus to understanding God's work in the world. He meant for us to hear it, and hear it well.

Each of the five Gospel selections about bread has a different point about its significance. In the past few weeks, we have heard about the feeding of the 5,000, where a small amount of food was able to nourish everyone. That story was about abundance and the economy of God's grace. Two weeks ago, we were reminded to work for the sustenance of God, for the bread that is Jesus, not for food that perishes. In that Gospel, we are reminded to put our resources, our time and our talent and our treasure, in the work of God, that which sustains us into eternity, not the work of humankind, which will only fill our bellies and hearts momentarily. Last week, Jesus told us that this bread, the bread that is his body, will keep us in eternal life, that we will no longer be held by death.

Today's particular lesson reminds us that the old is passing away, that Jesus, the new thing, has arrived and we, as his followers, have to sign on with our whole hearts, with our bodies and souls. We must eat and know ourselves whole and wholly loved.

So back to that old adage: you are what you eat. It would be absolutely ridiculous for us to struggle with this on any literalist sense. Clearly, I am neither a broccoli floret nor a Chips Ahoy. But those are some of the things that nourish my body into what it is: mostly strong and healthy, sometimes indulgent and forgiving.

The folks around Jesus struggled with the same literalist trap when Jesus spoke about consuming his flesh, as did folks for several centuries afterwards. The Jews around Jesus put their heads in a huddle and mumbled to each other: how in the world does he expect us to eat his flesh? That's gross. It is against our cleanliness code. It doesn't make any sense. And why? Why would we do such a thing? Taken literally, this posed some serious problems.

The nascent church continued to struggle through its first few centuries: Does the bread become actual flesh during the Eucharist? At what point does the transformation happen? Why then does it still taste like bread? Taken in an historical literal sense, even more problems were posed.

It sounds kind of silly to us today, but these were deeply debated matters. To some, they are still very important.

In the Episcopal Church, we profess to belief in the Real Presence of Christ. In short, that means Jesus is here, present in the Eucharist, but that we're content not really knowing exactly how that happens. It is, like so many things in our tradition, the middle way. But we are clear that the meal set before us in the Holy Eucharist is more than just a remembrance, more than just a symbol. Christ is with us and within us. In that, we are certain.

We also believe that, just as in body we are what we eat, in spirit, we are what we eat as well. When we, individually, go forward to receive the Body of Christ, we become the Body of Christ. When we, as a community, kneel to accept the Body, we become the Body. We are what we eat.

Of course, the act of consuming the consecrated Bread and Wine are not alone what make us Christ. We are what we eat, sure, but it is through the actions leading up to the consumption: hearing the word, saying our prayers, confessing our sins, those things prepare us for the eating and the becoming. Then we go into the world to make good on what we have become, to fulfill the promises we have made in the eating.

Now, like in the filling of our mortal bellies, there are good choices and bad choices when we come to the table to eat of the Body and the Blood of Jesus Christ. We can approach the table as a duty, something we are forced to do out of guilt or obligation. We can skip the parts that come before, going through the motions and ignoring the content. We can leave this place relieved that we don't have to think about church and Jesus again for another seven days and leave the promises behind.

I wonder in those instances, too, if we are what we eat: bland, unfulfilled.

Maybe.

But I think that God has use for us even then. I believe intention is vital when we come to the table. I believe that we should approach the table every time with humility, and open heart and a clear conscience. But I also know that God will work with us and through us despite ourselves, despite our own self-sabotage. Some days, I think we need to fake it until we make it, because even if you are going through the motions, God is making plans for you. I think ideally, we would come to the table with every best intention and a grateful heart, but on the days you are just able to approach the table upright and with our shoes on the right feet, well, congratulations, we're glad you're here.

There is a reason my colleagues and I think you should be here on Sunday morning, every Sunday morning. And it has little to nothing to do with our average weekly attendance or the weekly dollar amount in the plate. It has to do with the fact that we believe in this bread. We believe in this Body, both the one that was broken and resurrected, but also the one that has eaten and is becoming.

I speak from the experience of the church of many centuries when I say you are what you eat and this choice is a good one. And the more you are here for it, the more your heart will be changed. And you, the Body of Christ, will change the world.