

“Fine Dining”

Valley Presbyterian Church – August 16, 2009

Rev. John Wahl

Proverbs 9:1-6

John 6:51-58

Everyone has their own little quirks about eating, myself included, which are not always easily understood by those around us. I prefer ketchup on my grilled cheese, fruited yogurt replacing jelly on my biscuits and sometimes apple juice on my cereal for breakfast. These are the little preferences in our daily food; those details that make our eating habits our own.

It is not only the peculiarities in our diet, but many small, personal choices and preferences that give us life in abundance. But, like our food favorites, we usually do not consider our personal quirks and peculiarities as important to our faith. But, God has created each of us to be unique; in some ways maybe even peculiar and quirky. While the foundation of our common faith may be the same, each of us has been engineered with different likes and various needs.

When Jesus talks about himself as the bread that will forever abate our hunger, he is talking about a different kind of bread. It is not like the manna with which the ancient Israelites had been gifted in the wilderness; a substance that fulfilled their daily needs, but did not offer them what they needed to truly have life. To live eternally, to live out what God intends for each of us as uniquely created beings, we require something with greater complexity, something we can chew on and appreciate fully.

Jesus says to the people, “Very truly I tell you, unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not live.” This seems to be at odds with what he had previously told them, that “whoever believes has eternal life.” That is the gold-standard – we have been taught – that salvation comes to us by faith alone; according to that which we believe. Now, it seems, Jesus is saying that we also must do something – that we must participate in a particular meal – in order to truly attain life.

Christians do take part in that meal which we call holy communion – some more often than others – we break bread and pour into the cup and pray that it might become for us the body and blood of Christ our Lord. Jesus does not ask us to fully understand this, only to do it. But, while we partake in the meal, we are also asked to chew on its meaning, to discern how eating his flesh and drinking his blood draws us into a mystical communion with God and God’s people. We are called to ponder how this spiritual food not only fills us, but can also fulfill in us

what God has intended for us; and to consider what blessings might be drawn not only from the meal, but from our participation in the body of Christ which we have joined.

According to one observer, “As modern people, we are conditioned to live in a flattened, demystified world that is only what we can see or touch. The modern world loves “this is only” statements: this is only bread, this is just a day like any other, this is only a Jew from Nazareth.”¹ In John’s Gospel, Jesus tries to tell the crowds that since the Word has entered the world and become flesh, we can expect more – more mystery, more life, and more truth.

In this morning’s reading from Proverbs, we are introduced to Lady Wisdom who, like Jesus, invites the people to come and join together in a feast of bread and wine which has been prepared for them. Each of us has been given the choice of whether or not to respond to God’s invitation for a fulfilling, blessed life. God intends an abundant life for us; not one of faithful drudgery, but one of great satisfaction and happiness. The wine offered to us at Lady Wisdom’s party is for enjoying, just like the new, improved wine that Jesus provides when prompted by his mother at the wedding in Cana.²

But, this vision of a banquet may not seem like the life that many of us know. In the church and in the world, many of us are busy, full of responsibilities, lacking the time, the resources, or the opportunity for truly fine dining. As summer seems to be quickly drawing to a close, this may be the time to ask ourselves whether we are pursuing a life of wisdom and mystery, or instead racing around in pursuit of those things that do not truly satisfy. Are we seeking to embody a life of mature faith, or are we settling for less than we are intended to be?

“Eating this bread” means accepting Jesus’ teachings and living by them, in the same way that the Old Testament speaks of the Torah as God-given food. While we may have already heard or read the scriptures, our hunger for the hope and the truth that lies within them will return to us daily. Allowing God’s word to give us sustenance will lead us into eternal life, the mystical richness of life that is beyond the day-to-day.

Jurgen Moltmann writes: “Eternal life has nothing to do with timelessness and death, but is full-filled life here on earth that makes us yearn that it will never end.” By living life to the fullest, we bring joy to the present and hope for the future. William Coffin adds: “we are on the road to heaven now if we walk with

¹ William Willimon in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 3

² Dean McDonald in *Feasting on the Word*, August 2006

God. Eternal life is not a possession conferred at death; it is a present endowment. We live it now and continue it through death.”³

You may have noticed that the liturgy and readings for today’s service has been drawn from five distinct translations of the Bible, all different from what we typically use in our service. Why all these translations? Because we have all been created with unique tastes and preferences; that is what God intended for us. And because Jesus, the Word that became flesh, wants us to all to be able to eat of his flesh and drink of his blood. Jesus wants us to enjoy every taste and sensation that is promised to us in God’s great feast. Lady Wisdom invites all of us to take pleasure in every part of the Word; to be able to digest the words of truth that come to us in Christ.

At yesterday’s ordination service, Karin was asked this question first: “Do you affirm that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God’s Word to you?” Because we are unique individuals, then the Word of God is for us also unique. We benefit from having it revealed to us in different ways which, though they may differ in style and vocabulary, are still authoritative to us. In other words, they are living bread that feed us and nurture us and sustain us.

If you are like me, it is a struggle to maintain the daily discipline of feasting on God’s Word. Many times I have started such a discipline, only to have it broken almost as soon as it began. Our hunger for scripture is not like the kind of hunger that we have for regular bread; for we allow excuses and interruptions to distract us from reading God’s word; failing to carve out the time because we are certain we can get by without it. And even if we do adopt a practice of daily reading, we too often treat it more like a protein shake; a supplement that can quickly be ingested so that we can get all the health benefits without taking the time to prepare a balanced meal.

In the next few weeks, I will be asking you to join me in a new practice of fine dining; to adopt a daily discipline of scripture reading. William Carl, who is currently President at Pittsburgh Seminary, has devised a daily schedule for reading one chapter from the Bible each day, in sequence, Genesis to Revelation. Over the course of several years, the entirety of the Old and New Testaments can be read in daily doses. This is done most effectively, he says, when it is adopted in a community of faith who can both hold one another accountable and show forth the grace of God for the lapses that some of us, myself included, will almost certainly show. Those of us who accept this invitation will start be starting in

³ Moltmann, *The Coming of God*; Coffin, *Credo*

September with a feast of the Psalms. I hope and pray that your spiritual calendar is not already full.

Is this the best way to feast of God's word? Maybe not. Might you eventually find a different method that suits your particular tastes better? Maybe so. But, for those of us who seek to experience life eternal, in this life and the one to come, Jesus asks us not only to believe in him, but also to eat of his flesh and drink of his blood. May we, as his body recreated on earth, inspire and encourage one another to feast on his flesh, to chew on his word, and so live a full and full-filled life. AMEN.