

"What Is *Our* Food?"
Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent
Lectionary Year A
March 27, 2011
Text: John 4:27-34
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I have to admit that I love food. That should be obvious when you look at me. I didn't obtain this physique accidentally; there have been years of dedication devoted to gaining this rather round shape. Of course what I call devotion, my wife calls abuse. Po-tay-to/Po-tah-to.

Stephanie and I are much different in this regard. She eats to live, while I live to eat. It drives her crazy that I start thinking about the next meal I would like for us to have either prior to or immediately after the one we presently are consuming. It also drives her crazy that I bring up the subject of the day's meals the first thing in the morning, shortly after she has gotten out of bed but long before she is awake. So there is no doubt that food is important to me. I once was asked by a stranger the denomination I serve when he found out I was a minister. I told him I was an Epicurean.

A lot has changed in our world in my lifetime, but our culture's approach to food has changed as much or more than anything. When I was a kid growing up in Gainesville, there was no entire cereal aisle at

the grocery store. There was a small section devoted to a limited number of cereal options: Corn Flakes, Wheat Chex, Shredded Wheat, and Raisin Brand. There were no food channels on television. We didn't seem to care if our olive oil was extra virgin or not, and our local Safeway didn't carry sushi. Back in the day your choice of lettuce was pretty well limited to iceberg, organic was second year chemistry in college, and free range would have been understood as a great deal at the appliance store in town.

These days, going to buy groceries is akin to being a kid in a candy store, with the store in question being Market Street or Whole Foods or Sprouts or Central Market. We do love our food, and we have discriminating tastes when it comes to meals. We will drive for miles to go to our favorite Mexican food restaurant, passing fourteen others on the way there. When we discover a new dining experience, we can't wait to share it with our friends. The new restaurant in the Bishop Arts District, Lucia, has been booked every night of the week for a month or more ever since it got a five star rating a few weeks ago in the newspaper. Our reservation is for Friday, April 8.

But being serious about food and placing a high value on it is nothing new. Some of the most notable authors in Western literature have waxed eloquently on the virtues of a good meal. Here are but a few examples: "If more of us valued food and cheer above hoarded

gold, it would be a much merrier world" [J. R. R. Tolkien]. "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well" [Virginia Woolf]. "There is no love sincerer than the love of food" [George Bernard Shaw]. "The only time to eat diet food is while you're waiting for the steak to cook" [Julia Child]. "I am not a glutton—I am an explorer of food" [Erma Bombeck].

Here are a few more culinary quotes: "After a good dinner one can forgive anybody, even one's own relatives" [Oscar Wilde]. "We must have a pie. Stress cannot exist in the presence of a pie" [David Mamet]. "There is one thing more exasperating than a wife who can cook and won't, and that's a wife who can't cook and will" [Robert Frost]. "You can tell a lot about a fellow's character by his way of eating jelly beans" [Ronald Reagan]. And of course, who can forget the immortal words of Arlo Guthrie, "You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant"?

Food plays a major role in the Bible, as you know. God fed manna and quail to the Hebrew horde he had delivered from bondage in Egypt as they journeyed through the desert for forty years. Many of the laws God insisted the Israelites follow in Canaan were those pertaining to dietary restrictions. Jesus fed the five thousand and then the four thousand with nothing more than a boy's lunch of loaves and fishes. Every time you turn a page in one of Gospels, you read about Jesus'

being at someone's house eating dinner, and the memorial meal we call the Last Supper instituted a new covenant with God and a ritual of the Church still practiced almost completely unchanged for over two thousand years.

In our Gospel lesson for this morning from John, we tend to focus so much of our attention on the subject of water, that we overlook the references to food in the story. Yes, there is the Samaritan woman at the well, drawing water at an unlikely hour, from whom Jesus asks for a drink. The Lord then uses the metaphor of living water to describe what he uniquely has to offer to all those who would thirst for the intimate relationship with God that Jesus has as God's Son.

But food is important in this story as well. We learn in the first portion of the passage that Jesus has sent the disciples into town to buy groceries. Apparently they were running low on provisions and needed to stock up on some staples so as to be able to continue their journey. When his followers return, they urge Jesus to eat some of what they had purchased. (This is one of the many ways I can relate to the disciples; they, too, always seemed to have their minds on food.) His reply to them is cryptic and puzzling: "I have food to eat that you do not know anything about." It seems Jesus has "other" food, "special" food, a "mystery meal" of some kind.

Don't you know that at least one of the disciples muttered to himself, "There Jesus goes again, talking in metaphors. I hate it when he does that, because I never can quite figure out what he means." So they disciples ask each other flat out, "Who fed him? It sure wasn't us. What? Is the food we bought in town not good enough? Was there a traveling gourmet kitchen that happened by while we were gone? If so, who was the vendor? Did we miss out on free samples of some great dishes? How did we let that happen?"

But Jesus explains plainly enough: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work." Jesus makes it clear that the food which sustains him is his vocation: *to do the will of God all the way to completion* [NIB, p. 569]. For Jesus, what ultimately nourishes, energizes, satisfies, and fills him is being God's servant.

The portion of the story of the Samaritan woman at the well begs the question, "What Is *Our* Food?" What nourishes us, energizes us, satisfies us, sustains us, and fills us? What do we crave and can't seem to get nearly enough of? For what have we developed a serious appetite and seek to satisfy on a regular basis? For what do we feel at times like we are starving?

Is it money? Is it power or control? Is it status or prestige or influence? Is it security? Is it stimulation of one kind or another? Is it happiness? Is it material possessions? Is it friendship? Is it love?

We know what Jesus' food was. It was to do the will of God to completion, which he did. *He served God all the way to the cross.* He completely trusted God, obeyed God, submitted himself to God. He was totally dedicated to God above and beyond all other things in this world. Nothing mattered more to him than to be who God had called him to be. And Jesus calls us to follow him in this regard. *He asks us to make serving God our food.* So instead of living to eat, as I have suggested seems to be true for me at least some of the time, we are to live to serve God, to do his will for our lives.

This question, "What Is *Our* Food?" is a good question for the season of Lent. It is a Lenten question, because it invites us to examine critically whether or not we are seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. And for that reason, I would suggest, fasting has become an important aspect of observing Lent. As we give up food, we are to act as though we, like Jesus, understand that our spiritual food, that which ultimately sustains us, is to be God's word and will for daily living.

You've heard the expression, "You are what you eat." I am not sure what that really means, but I think it reminds us of the relationship between *eating* something and *becoming* someone. That's why we celebrate communion as often as we do. It is a memorial meal. It helps us to understand that *we are to feed on Jesus in order to*

become like him. That is what God wants for each of us, and the truth is, we can't live by bread alone. In order to experience authentic living, we must develop a hearty appetite for trusting and obeying God. That has to be what we hunger for, what we crave, what we can't seem to get enough of. That must be our food.