

Eating Eucharistically

John 6: 1-14

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 7) 2011

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Why did God create a world in which every living creature must eat? (N. Wirzba's *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, p. 1ff). Have you ever thought about that? When you think about it, eating is no trivial matter.

So I'll tell you what I think, and what the church's theologians for over 2000 years have said: Eating joins us to each other, to other creatures and the world, and to God. Eating establishes a membership that confirms that all creatures are in need of each other and upon God. As much as we might take it for granted, food is a holy and humbling mystery. And we can't begin to understand it until we realize again its origin in God and its end is in God. Every time we eat – every mundane act of eating is a daily invitation to commune with God and God's creation.

We know that when we come to the Lord's Table for this sacred meal, that more is going on here than simply eating a bite of bread and a sip of Welch's Grape Juice. We know that. But what I'm saying is that every time we eat, there is more going on. Eating is the chance to realize what the "more" is. Eating is when we can reconnect, re-member, our participation in the extraordinary complexity of God's creation.

Wendell Berry says that one of the great superstitions of our consumer age is that "money brings forth food" ("In Distrust of Movements"). But here at this Table, just like if we were standing out in the middle of a garden or a farm, we remember again that food is a gift. Someone plants it, works it, and harvests it but

it is also the mystery of sun, water, good soil with nutrients by which any and all food grows. It is a gift. And as with all of creation, and all gifts, food does not have to be. “The Lord gives, the Lord takes, blessed be the name of the Lord,” said Job.

Today for our Scripture I’m doing something I haven’t done but a couple of times in the 22 years I’ve been here – to repeat the Scripture from the week before. But since we’re gathering around the Lord’s Table this morning I wanted to stay with this story of the Feeding of the 5000 from last Sunday.

Jesus is surrounded by this great crowd of hungry people out in the middle of the wilderness. The disciples have no idea of what they’re going to do until a little boy comes forward and offers his own food of five loaves and two fish. Jesus receives the gift the little boy offers and transforms it into enough food to feed the 5000 men, plus women and children. And as all four Gospel accounts make clear, there was such an abundance of food that twelve basketfuls of leftovers were gathered by the disciples.

One reason this story is so well known is that it is the only miracle story recorded in all four Gospels. And although John’s version uses slightly different language than the other three, all four are quite clear in what Jesus did and said: Jesus receives and takes the bread, blesses it and gives thanks for it, breaks it, and gave it or shared it. If anything of this sounds faintly familiar it is because it is explicitly the same thing Jesus says and does at the Last Supper: “he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them.” The Apostle Paul repeats this to the Corinthian church (I Cor. 11: 23-26): he took, gave thanks, broke it, and gave it.

This is how Jesus ate every meal that we know about. In Luke 24, in the story of the walk to Emmaus, when the newly resurrected Jesus is invited to share a meal with Cleopas and the others, Luke tells us that Jesus followed this same fourfold action: took, blessed, broke, and gave. The church came to see this fourfold pattern especially in this sacred meal in worship, but from what we can tell, this is what Jesus did every time he ate.

This sacred meal is often called the Lord's Supper. But it is also called Holy Communion – we gather together and eat this food, so we participate again in communion with God, with one another, and with God's world. And it is also called the Eucharist, which is the Greek word for thanksgiving. In participating we receive the gift and grace of God and give thanks.

This is why we say grace over all of our meals, not just this one. We give thanks every time we eat because every time we are participating in God's grace and communion. This is why we want to learn to eat all our meals Eucharistically. We want to learn that what we do at this Table becomes the pattern for all our meals. And indeed, becomes the pattern for all our living.

But that's hard to do with much of the food we eat. Rather than receiving gifts, we are consuming products. Products which we have no sense of where they came from, who grew them, how the growers were treated and paid, how the land is treated, how the product was transported or processed, how far it came, what chemicals are in it, and so on and so on. No wonder that consuming such products is not a Eucharist.

My friend Norman Wirzba says we should notice the close etymological kinship of "thinking" and "thanking." Only one letter makes the words different. In traditional societies the two words are related to each other. To think is to pay

attention; to stop, to slow down, to take the time to notice. Thinking leads to thanking. We slow down and notice the food we are about to eat and give thanks.

I mentioned this last Wednesday night before our church potluck that the Shaker tradition is that before every meal is to pause in silence to reflect upon what they are about to eat, and what they are about to do in eating it. It is a good practice to learn for it calms and focuses our minds while we are normally preoccupied with everything else but food.

In *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* Barbara Kingsolver is preparing a major feast for a big birthday bash. Her family is committed to growing their own food or buying it locally, so there is no running down to the closest superstore to buy stuff. She writes about going out to the garden to harvest carrots and then she pauses and thinks about what she is doing. “I stood for a minute clutching my carrots, looking out over our pasture to Walker Mountain on the horizon. The view from our garden is spectacular. I thought about people I knew who right at that moment might be plucking chickens, picking strawberries and lettuce, just for us. I felt grateful to the people involved, and the animals also. I don’t say this (fu-see-shus-ly) facetiously. I sent my thanks across the country, like any sensible person saying grace before a meal” (p. 105).

If thinking and thanking are so close, then perhaps un-thinking might very well be connected to being un-thankful, ungrateful. Ignorance leads to ingratitude. When we don’t know or understand or have any meaningful relationship with what we buy and who makes it, or what we eat and who grows it and prepares it, we do not care or cherish or see any deep value or beauty in them. We don’t know and don’t care if it is good or bad, well made or shoddy, healthy or full of chemicals, or if it is part of caring for creation or destructive of creation.

But when we think and thank; when we say grace, we become sympathetic participants in God's good creation and the wonderful life God has given us. In eating we realize again that we members of God's great communion. Which is also why giving thanks becomes subversive of the industrial food business. Eating eucharistically becomes a counter-cultural act which commits us to the shalom, the wholeness, peace, and harmony of God's creation. Then, saying grace and eating becomes a sacrament – a means of participating in God and in the grace of God. This is a true Eucharist.

Amen and amen.