

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.

Those attending church in recent weeks will be aware that as an Episcopal congregation adhering to a cycle of scripture readings known as the Revised Common Lectionary, we have been listening/attending to and wrestling with a portion of the Gospel of John identifying Jesus as the “bread of life”. In this we understand Jesus as substance/matter with a *supernatural* quality, something which if consumed in faith, enables the believer to live beyond death – to live as Jesus says, forever. Comprehending the fullest meaning of such declaration takes time and considerable reflection, not something to which we easily adjust in this post-Christian, scientifically oriented world. At one point Jesus asks his disciples, *who do people say that the Son of Man is? And his disciples respond, some say you are John the Baptist, others say that you are Elijah and others say one of the prophets.* Jesus then turns to the disciples and asks them directly, *who do you say I am?* So the challenge with which we wrestle this morning is: what do we mean when we say Jesus is the bread of life?

I have spoken of a book we will work with as part of our adult education program this fall called, Eat This Book. Eugene Peterson, Presbyterian pastor and professor, takes his title from the Book of Revelation in which John the Evangelist, like the Old Testament prophet – Ezekiel and Jeremiah – is commanded to eat the word of God. Take this book, says God, and eat it. What does it mean to eat the word of God? Ezekiel, Jeremiah and St. John accepted the invitation quite literally consuming scrolls of papyrus upon which the word of God was written. Today, we might better understand this invitation metaphorically—to eat the word of God means to (as we say in one of our Episcopal prayers: to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the word of God) to internalize the word of God that God’s words become a way of life. No longer are we to talk *about* God, but know God deep inside ourselves.

Friday I was had a conversation with a Westporter who had raised his family in a loosely-practicing Jewish household. While in college his son thought he wanted to become a rabbi. Now married, the son has given up his hope of the rabbinate, but has moved to Israel to deepen his association with one of the ultra-orthodox sects of Judaism. When I inquired where he lived, I was surprised to hear his father say the West Bank. The West Bank? Yes, said the father, and I quote, *he has become one of the crazies who believes God will fulfill the ancient promise that from the Nile to the Euphrates will become the home of faithful Jews. My son, said the father, supported by the state of Israel spends his days praying and studying the scriptures till that time is fulfilled.*

Each of us comes to scripture in our own way, in our own time; our hopes and dreams shaped by life in relationship with the words of God. Some understand the Word of God literally like this young man in Israel, some metaphorically, some figuratively, and others casually. The Word of God has been and will be the heart and soul of Christian life. Without the Word as the authoritative center of our communal and personal lives, we will wander as did the ancient Jews in the wilderness of the Sinai, mired unmercifully in our own needs, wants and feelings.

The image of Jesus as the ‘bread of life’—the Word of God *we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest* parallels a similar story from the gospel’s 4th chapter in which a Samaritan woman meets Jesus at a well. (Samaritans once adhered to Judaism but intermarried with Canaanites, considered from that time by the Jews as un-faithful.) The Samaritan woman is startled when Jesus asks her for a drink of water. She is startled because Jesus, a Jew, challenges custom asking an “unclean” woman for a drink. Jesus and the Samaritan woman continue their conversation during which the woman hears Jesus speak of himself as *living water*. This is water (like bread) imbued with a “supernatural” quality quenching humankind’s deepest thirst. To drink of this water is to live a new life in God. She asks for this *living water* seeking a life that looks from the outside like all lives. But from the inside, she will live a life different from others as she learns to trust God. Jesus: the bread of life; Jesus: the living water for those who trust in God.

My intention this morning is to awaken new understandings of our relationship with hunger and with food. How do our deepest hungers control our lives? For what are we *really* hungry? Food is more than the fuel by which we live; it has emotional, moral, sociological and spiritual power. The social scientist Abraham Maslow developed what he called, the “hierarchy of human needs.” At the top of his schema is physiological need: hunger, thirst and bodily comforts. Next in his hierarchy is the need for safety and security. Next is the importance of belonging and of

loving and being loved. At the bottom of the schema, Maslow notes the need for self-esteem, approval and recognition.

Hunger is the title of a chapter of Annie Lamott's book, Traveling Mercies, Some Thoughts on Faith. She says: *This is the story of how, at the age of thirty-three, I learned to feed myself. To begin with, here's what I did until then: I ate, starved, binged, purged, grew fat, grew thin, grew fat, grew thin, binged, purged, dieted, was good, was bad, grew fat, grew thin, grew thinner. One week after my father was diagnosed with brain cancer, I discovered bulimia. I felt like I'd discovered the secret to life, because you could eat yourself into a state of emotional numbness but not gain weight...I looked fine on the outside; thin, cheerful, even successful. But on the inside I was utterly obsessed.*

She goes on to describe how slowly but surely, with lots of therapy, love and support she learned how to feed herself; to recognize and *know* the different hungers in her life. In this way, she was able to discover the source of her deepest hunger and, as well, the source of her deepest satisfaction.

Dr. David A. Kessler, the one-time Commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, has written a fascinating book entitled, The End of Overeating: Taking Control of the Insatiable American Appetite. Kessler notes the seemingly insatiable appetite of Americans; what he calls "*conditioned hypereating*". He notes that as humans attempt to adapt to their environments arising from our need for more than just food and in order to feel safe, love, self-esteem and approval, we eat our way into illness and disease. An eating epidemic is transforming our nation. From the time of the Great Depression when many went without food, to the years when as a nation of small farmers we grew what we ate, to present time of mega-farms in which few Americans grow, gather and distribute the food we eat, to the loss of socially conditioned habits such as families gathering around a dinner table America has become a "fast-food nation." The more we eat the less satisfied we become. IN our attempt to fill ourselves and our cravings, we become more obese even while many of us feel empty and diminished so much of the time.

What is the source and satisfaction of our deepest craving, our deepest hunger? Does the food on which we spend so much energy and money nurture us? Of all the things for which we hunger: love, power, fame, sex, money, security, companionship—what really satisfies? Are we who call ourselves Christians able to live through the wisdom of the scriptures? Do we live *by bread alone*? Do we not need *every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord*?

Viktor Frankl lived through the horrors of Nazi concentration camps and wrote the extraordinary book, Man's Search For Meaning. He offers insight on those who survived those horrors, noting how some were able to survive. Those who survived ate very little. For them, food was insignificant since something else became more important; something Frankl called the *wish to be*. Survivors may not have realized the importance of something more than their comfort and despair. It was their desire to live that kept them going when others died. Like manna appearing to the Israelites in the wilderness, God sustained them with *food* that was more than bread.

In a culture of extraordinary abundance; in a community of walk-in pantries, freezers and refrigerators well-stocked; of stores overflowing with products we do not need; at a time when food pantries in homeless shelters and community kitchens remain empty, our challenge is to take note of what it is we are really hungry for. In the miracle stories of the feeding of the five and four thousand, of breakfast by the lakeside and at Emmaus following the resurrection, Jesus speaks of hunger that food does not touch. This is a hunger that can only be satisfied by God and a relationship with Jesus.

Henri Nouwen published more than 40 books, the last of which, interestingly, is entitled *Bread for the Journey*. He speaks of "food" feeding the hearts and souls of Christians on our journeys through life, into death, made new in resurrection. *...proclaiming our...vision with great conviction and great humility, we may gradually grow into the truth we speak.* May we also grow into the truth of which we speak, the word of God, the wisdom of God and the love of God as our daily food every moment of our lives.