

PENTECOST 14B – 8/26/18

You Are What You Eat

(John 6:56-69)

Do you remember the movie *Super Size Me*? It was a 2004 documentary – actually nominated for an Academy Award that year – which was written and directed by, and starred, an independent filmmaker by the name of Morton Spurlock. And it followed a 30-day period in his life, from February 1 to March 2, 2003, during which Spurlock ate only fast food from McDonald's; nothing else. The film then documented his rather bizarre journey; including the effects that this lifestyle had on his physical and psychological health and well-being.

During those 30 days, Spurlock ate exclusively at McDonald's restaurants three times a day (breakfast, lunch, and dinner), seven days a week; eating every item on the fast food chain's menu at least once, and agreeing to super-size his meal whenever asked by those who were taking his order; which turned out to be a total of nine times over the course of that month.

At the beginning of the experiment, the 32-year-old Spurlock was in above average shape, according to his personal trainer. He was also seen by three physicians; a cardiologist, a gastroenterologist, and a general practitioner. And while all three predicted that his "McDiet" would probably have negative, unwelcomed effects on his body, *none* of them expected anything too drastic or significant. One doctor even justified that conclusion by citing the human body's adaptability.

Now prior to embarking on his McDiet, Spurlock generally ate a varied diet, but always had vegan meals in the evening to please his girlfriend

who was a vegan chef. Finally, at the beginning of the experiment, Spurlock (who was 6 feet 2 inches tall) had a body weight of 185 pounds.

Here then are the results:

- During those 30 days, Spurlock consumed an average of 5,000 calories per day, approximately *double* the recommended daily intake for an adult male that is needed to maintain his weight.
- In addition, he gained 24.5 pounds, going from 185 to 210, saw a 13% body mass increase, and raised his cholesterol level to 230.
- Moreover, he experienced mood swings, a lack of energy and enthusiasm, heart palpitations, and fat accumulation in his liver. In fact, afterwards, his doctors were surprised by the degree of deterioration in Spurlock's overall health; including a decrease in muscle mass and the obvious increase in body fat.
- Finally, after completing his experiment, it then took Spurlock a total of 14 months to completely lose the weight he had gained in just those 30 days.

The conclusion? As nutritionists – and our *moms* – have been telling us for generations: “You *are* what you eat.” In fact, we have all heard and know about the difference between so-called “healthy food” and “junk food.” As Jon Bloom writes, “Both will, in the short run, produce energy. But healthy food provides the *right kinds* of energy, enhances the operations of the body's complex systems, strengthens its resistance against disease, and increases its durability and longevity. Junk food, on the other hand,” he reminds us, “has essentially the *opposite* effect in all those areas, and contributes to the breaking down of the body over time.”

You *are* what you eat...

Now while there were those at the time who contested Spurlock's findings (after all, who eats only fast-food all day, every day), almost everyone, however, would agree that an exclusive diet of fast food – even a regular or *steady* diet of fast food – is simply not good for us. Instead, we are encouraged to eat a *variety* of foods; a balanced diet that includes grains, vegetables, and fruits. We are also encouraged to choose a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol; and to avoid too much sugar and sodium. In short, while we all have a biological need and hunger for food, not all foods are created equal, are they?

A husband and wife were once out to dinner at a Chinese restaurant. After enjoying a meal of greasy egg rolls, spicy beef, and fried rice among the other high-fat, high-sodium dishes they indulged in that evening, they topped off their meal with a traditional fortune cookie. Unfortunately, the reality of what they had both just consumed was revealed to them in a rather striking way when the husband opened *his* cookie and read the fortune inside: “You are what you eat. Choose wisely.”

You are what you eat...

You may have noticed that my sermon theme in your bulletin this morning is “To Whom Can We Go,” reflecting Peter's words in today's Gospel reading. But the more time I spent thinking about, and then working on, my sermon, it eventually occurred to me that a much more appropriate title would be those words: “You are what you eat.”

Because, in case you've been counting, this is the sixth week in a row that our gospel reading (somewhat ironically) has been taken from the *sixth* chapter of John. It started off with the feeding of the 5,000. But then, as Jesus continued to teach and interact with the crowds he had just fed, it quickly became apparent that *he* and *they* were no longer on the same page.

The crowds, for their part, simply enjoyed the food and fellowship – even if, as I suggested in my sermon back on Week One, the miracle was perhaps really all about their sharing with each other. Even so, their thoughts and minds apparently still remained fixated on physical hunger and the physical food which satisfies it. But Jesus, on the other hand, was trying to make a much larger, much more important, point.

He began to talk about “spiritual” food, bread from heaven that gives eternal life to those who eat it. For instance:

- In John 6:27, Jesus says, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”
- In John 6:33, he says, “For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”
- When they respond in verse 34, “Sir, give us this bread always,” Jesus answers them, “I *am* the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”
- In verse 48, Jesus repeats that claim, and then adds in verse 49, “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness and they died.”
- Verse 50: “This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and *not* die.”

- Verse 51: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world... is my *flesh*.”

And it’s here, with that declaration that the bread he will give for the life of the world is his flesh, that we begin to have a problem. His audience began to dispute among themselves, we are told. “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” they asked.

Ritually and culturally, such a claim was preposterous. Unthinkable and unheard of. Even today, such a claim sounds kind of creepy and cannibalistic.

Martin Copenhaver, the President of Andover Newton Theological School and an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, recalls once repeating the words of institution where Jesus says, “This is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for you,” when a little girl in the congregation, all of a sudden, said in a loud voice, “Ew, yuk!”

“Ew, yuk” is right. How *can* this be? It’s a question, a mystery, that *still* puzzles and confounds us. Copenhaver also reminds us that, while the early church simply affirmed that the risen Christ was present with them in their celebrations of the Lord’s Supper, during the *Middle Ages*, however, theologians made laborious attempts to explain exactly *how* and *when* Christ was present in the sacrament. In fact, it was during this period, he says, that the theory of “transubstantiation” was advanced, whereby the very substance of the bread and wine is *transformed* into the substance of the flesh and blood of Christ – even though the outward *appearance* of the bread and wine remains unchanged.

In Latin, the words “This is my body” are “Hoc est corpus meum.” Again, the words by which the bread is miraculously transformed into the physical presence of Christ. However, Protestant reformers, he reminds us, while often still affirming Christ’s presence were bothered by such interpretations. (As Lutherans, for example, we affirm the real presence of Christ “in, with, and under” the bread and wine. In other words, we believe that Christ is truly present even though the bread and wine still *remain* bread and wine.)

Going back to those Protestant reformers; to them, it certainly *sounded* like some kind of “sacred magic.” Not surprisingly, then, that phrase “Hoc est corpus” eventually morphed into the familiar magician’s incantation: “hocus-pocus.”

But even though we often find ourselves *still* trying to understand the mystery of the sacrament, the question we have to ask ourselves this morning is simply: Is Jesus even *talking* about Holy Communion here? After all, at this point in the gospel story, at this point in the chronology, the Last Supper, not to mention the crucifixion haven’t even *occurred* as yet. So, even if the gospel writer at some future point – and looking back in time – is employing sacramental language and overtones, is that really what *Jesus* is trying to say here? In other words, was Jesus speaking “literally” or “figuratively”?

Here’s what *I* think was happening. Feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and otherwise responding to the various needs of people, was obviously a huge part of Jesus’ ministry. No question about it. But certainly not the *only* part. Maybe not even the most *important* part.

Instead, what Jesus seems to be saying – *throughout* the gospels, in fact – is that he has come to reveal and to usher in the Kingdom of God. His healings and miracles, by which he responded to the needs of people around him, were only *signs* of that kingdom. What he *really* came to do was to reveal and model an utterly new way of thinking and living. In fact, he was the very embodiment of that kingdom and of God himself, and of how God wants us to live and behave.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us,” proclaimed John 1:14. God has come to us, to *be* with us, in the flesh. And now he invites us to join him on a journey of faith. “I *am* the way,” he said.

So, as one commentator has put it, “Jesus was not speaking (here) of the Lord’s Supper... what Jesus was saying was, ‘Just as you take food and drink within your body and it becomes a part of you, so you must receive *me* within your innermost being so that I can give you life.’”

In reality, then, it’s about the life of discipleship; the life of following in the way of Jesus. No surprise, then, that in the very beginning the Christian movement was simply *called* “The Way.”

You *are* what you eat; metaphorically speaking, that is.

Or, as David Lose, has written, “Jesus... provides the only food which truly nourishes... he gives us his own self, his own flesh and blood, to sustain us on our journey...”

You are what you eat.

It turns out that this was a difficult teaching, we're told. In our own day as well, I would argue. Jesus was even prompted to ask of them, "Does this offend you?" Because, just like his original audience, we *too* are often completely focused and fixated only on our own immediate needs and wants.

Author Jeanne Zornes has written, "As a new Christian, I presumed Jesus' main job was taking care of *me*. He led me to find a job, roommates to share apartment costs, and a car that ran. But after a while, my tastes got fussier. Like the Israelites waking up to manna every morning, I was tired of the same-old, same-old. I wanted a home with more privacy, a more interesting yet less stressful job, and a shinier new car. My list continued to grow. I wanted Jesus to perk me up when I was down, remove my difficulties, and make living a whole lot easier. When those things didn't come, I felt as if Jesus had walked away from me."

In reality, of course, what she had *actually* discovered was that, by focusing on the "things" in her life and on Jesus as the "giver" of those things, it was really *she* who had walked away from *Jesus*.

And that's apparently what happened in today's gospel reading as well. Because of Jesus' teaching, and his focus on things greater and more important than simply their own immediate needs and desires, "...many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him," says John.

Or as Gary Hall, the dean of the Washington National Cathedral has put it, "So if you were someone who started following Jesus simply because you were attracted to what he could do for you, the idea that his

movement might be about *more* than making you feel better might shock and offend you.

The bottom line is that life is about more – much more – than simply what we eat and drink, or where we live, what we wear, and how we work. It's about a *way* of life. It's about so much *more* than our immediate needs and desires.

Focusing solely, or even primarily, on our immediate needs and desires is sort of like spiritual “junk food.” It feeds and satisfies... but only for a while.

However, following Jesus and embracing the life of discipleship is about “healthy” food and living. It's about responding to that gracious and life-affirming call from Jesus, and not just about what we can *get* or *receive* from Jesus.

A healthy life, in other words, is a life that is modeled – as much as is humanly possible, of course – after the life of Jesus. It's a life of loving and sharing and caring. It's a life that sees and understands that the world is bigger than my own selfish desires.

You are what you eat. Will we eat the junk food of instant gratification and self-centeredness? Or will we eat the healthy food that Jesus has come to offer us?

You are what you eat. Choose wisely.

Amen.