

Pentecost 12, Proper 15
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

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Good Eating

There is an ancient Irish tradition that says that the nine sacred hazelnut trees growing around the Well of Wisdom each dropped a hazelnut into the water. A salmon came and ate them all and gained all the knowledge in the world. The one who would eat this fish would gain all that knowledge. Eventually Fionn was the one who ate it and became the leader of the Fianna, the heroes of ancient Irish myth.

There is a long human history that links the symbol of eating with wisdom. Some of the most ancient traditions in Israel have to do with Lady Wisdom. In today's first lesson Wisdom builds a mansion with pillars and adornments, she prepares a feast of fine food and wine, and then she invites the foolish to come, eat at the banquet, and be wise. She is so very special because she reveals the heart of the Creator. What she teaches is the wisdom of the divine heart, the wisdom of our common Source.

Chana Rubin published a book in 2008 called, Food for the Soul. Traditional Jewish Wisdom for Healthy Eating. I have not read it, but one can imagine what it talks about. Eating wisely makes for health and vitality, it works toward that great ideal of God, Shalom, the peace of God, wellbeing in body, soul and spirit.

There is another book I have read. It's called, The Supper of the Lamb, a Culinary Reflection. It is written by a priest who is also a cook, the Rev. Robert Farrar Capon. It is a cookbook, it tells you how to make lamb stew, but it is also a theology primer: Reading it gives you language to speak about eating from a spiritual point of view, it talks about the whole issue of bodies as spiritual things, and the ways the physical realm can open us up to the spiritual through eating.

There is a long history in our tradition linking eating with worship. The ancient Hebrews prepared for the Exodus with a sacred and symbolic meal, the slaying of the Passover Lamb. They rehearse that whole formative moment in their history every year at Pascha, Passover. There is an interesting twist to the liturgy, if any of you have gone through it that is of utmost significance. Though there has been at least 3000 years since that event, the participants in a modern day Passover say, "I was a slave in Egypt..." This is not just the story of the origin of the people, it is the explanation of who they are. Eating the Passover is a commitment to a given way of life, a specific kind of relationship with the God of the Hebrews.

In Jesus' time the Temple stood as the place people returned once a year for worship. The Synagogue was where they went once a week, but the family table was the scene of worship every day. The table was a home altar. Eating was a sacred action. Every meal was a worship experience.

This tradition was taken over into the early church, where it formed the basis for the holy meal we celebrate every week. In today's Gospel lesson Jesus makes it very clear. Just like the holy meal of the Hebrews is a participation in the event of the Passover, so this holy meal of the Christians is a participation in the formative event behind our tradition: Jesus, the Christ.

One of the most foundational concepts behind any true religious tradition is that true worship leads to wisdom. To eat at the banquet of the life of God is to gain life, it is to live well, it is to move from foolishness to wisdom. As Richard Rohr said, unless your religion is making you a healthier person it is betraying you. To drink at the fountain of the Spirit of God is to commune with God, it is to live in harmony with the rest of the created order, and to take one's place in the order of things—nothing less, and nothing more.

This makes of Jesus the Great Wisdom Teacher of the Ages. As the book of John says at the very beginning, Jesus is the great revealer of the heart of the Father. So, the author of the book of Ephesians can write about living wisely, discerning the will of the Lord. This one, Jesus of Nazareth, what Jesus taught, what Jesus did, and who Jesus is for us Christians, this is the wisdom of the heart of God. Who Jesus is, is defined by death and resurrection. To participate in Jesus' death and resurrection is to die to the rule of the ego, and rise to the life of the Spirit. To participate in this is to live into that deep place within each of us where our spirits and God's Spirit are in prayer.

So what does that mean for us today? Every Sunday we gather at the table of the Lord to eat and drink the wisdom of the heart of God as known in Jesus Christ. For us, this moment together eating a holy meal is more than just a snack in the middle of the morning, and it's more than just magic that makes us feel good, get well, avoid problems and not sin. This is a participation in the Body of Christ. It is to commit ourselves once again to being little Christs in the world, people whose lives display the wisdom of the heart of the Father—incomplete, tarnished and blurred, no doubt, but there for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

And what is that wisdom? That the most important thing in the world is love, God's love, that unconditional and limitless love that sent Jesus to the Cross for us, to show us the way from death to life. To participate in the Eucharist is to commit oneself to a certain

kind of living.

A neat summary of it is found on pg. 305 in the Book of Common Prayer. In the Baptismal Covenant we summarize what this commitment is to which we give ourselves week by week. This is more than just the code by which Episcopalians live. We believe that this code reflects the very heart of God, this is a design for wise living.

It is made up of two parts. It begins with "I believe." The first part is the Apostle's Creed, linking us to the earliest days of our Church. That statement, "I believe," is not just a mental assent. It is a commitment. This language, code in the Church for the faith we hold, defines the revelation by which we have come to know God, God the Father's creative heart, God the Son's redeeming work and God the Holy Spirit's life-giving power. It proceeds with five declarations that commit us to:

- The life of the Church
- The moral life,
- The life of service,
- The life of evangelism,
- And the life of justice and peace.

Our culture is good at fueling the body like a race car at the Indy 500. You've seen it on TV. In 8 seconds the driver swings into the pit stop. In 8 seconds he gets new tires and 50 gallons of gas. In 8 seconds he's off to the race again to consume the resources he has taken onboard. But this eating and drinking is of a wholly different kind. This is not just fueling the body, and it's not even just fueling the soul for the moral struggles of the week—though it is that, too. It is a participation in something—the kingdom of God, and even more, it is a sharing in the life of Someone—Jesus of Nazareth, the human expression God.

If this is how we eat at Church, and if the ancient Hebrew table was an altar, perhaps in our homes we need to recapture what it means to eat in a holy way. What can you do to make your meals at home a reminder of the holy food and drink of our spiritual pilgrimage?

First, we can eat gratefully—paying attention to the gift of flavors and aromas that give us such pleasure in our eating, and taking pleasure by that action in the beauty and sacredness of the whole created order.

Then we can eat mindfully, mindful of the nutrition this gives our bodies, mindful of the process and the people by which this food arrives on our table and of the resources bestowed upon us by which we have food when others do not.

Finally, we can eat responsibly, not more than we need—as Gandhi said: I will not eat a single grain of rice more than I need,”—what we need rather than what we want. A bit more cost for healthy food will more than pay for itself in health and vitality. And we can eat fairly—close to home, close to the earth, and avoiding those foods whose preparation and transportation are abusive of people and the environment.

This, my sisters and brothers, makes a sacrament of every table. It is wise eating, this is worshipful eating, and this is good eating!