

August 9, 2009
Lectionary 19b
1 Kings 19:4-8; John 6:35, 41-51
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GOOD 4 U

We learn it early. All food isn't equal. Do these phrases come back from your childhood? *Eat your vegetables, they're good for you. No dessert until you clean your plate.* We know we can't live on potato chips and candy bars alone, yet if we were left to our own devices we would eat all the wrong things. And then pay the consequences in our bodies or our energy level or our life span.

But come on, deciding what to eat takes a lot of effort, intentionality, discipline. I've heard it said that if it didn't exist a hundred years ago, it isn't real food. A commentary on our packaged, over-processed, over-salted, often-artificial fare.

The choices at the Jewel, the Dominick's or Whole Foods are overwhelming. How many kinds of cereal can I possibly take in? Do I go for the cheapest? The brand name? The one in the health food aisle? The one on sale? The one with the prettiest presentation on the box? The one with the clever name? The one low in fat or carbs or calories? Or do I move things forward, and go with the one high in fiber?

There were so many kinds of cereal listed at Wikipedia that I didn't want to take the time to count them. There were ten versions of Cheerios alone: Apple Cinnamon Cheerios, Banana Nut Cheerios, Berry Burst Cheerios, Frosted Cheerios, Fruity Cheerios, Honey Nut Cheerios, Multi-Grain Cheerios, Oat Cluster Cheerios, Strawberry Yogurt Burst Cheerios, Vanilla Yogurt Burst Cheerios.

Shopping alone can make you tired! One writer put it this way: "Why has eating, an act of animal survival civilized by ritual and refinement, become more complicated than quantum physics ... I love food. I also see it as the agent of my destruction." (Barbara Harrison in *An Accidental Autobiography*).

We are in the midst of a multi-week, scriptural feast of bread and food images. All food isn't equal. After seeing Jesus' miracle of the loaves and fishes, the people want more magic, more fast food, more of Jesus the wonder-bread man. But Jesus says it over and over. It's about the bread ... but it's *not* about the bread.

I am the bread of life, Jesus says to us as well. Feed on me and you will never hunger and thirst. Eat of this bread and you will live forever.

To those new to these words, they can seem bizarre. And Christians certainly have been accused of cannibalism. But they come from the gospel of John, rich in metaphor and poetry. They go together with the other "I am" statements of Jesus. *I am the light of the world. I am the gate. I am the good shepherd. I am the vine.*

To feed on Jesus it not just having Jesus in your heart. It is to say that our very bodies are the temple of the divine. To feed on Jesus is to have his very life and nourishment in our bodies and souls.

The way we eat these days is probably not so different than the state of our spiritual lives. We eat on the go. We eat fast food. We often see food as mere "fuel" for our bodies.

The trouble is we've lost our connection to the food on our tables. We don't see the fields ripe with wheat or corn or blueberries. We don't watch the planting, harvesting and milling. We don't have a picture of all who have worked that we might eat. Not to mention the plants and animals that have literally given of their lives.

You need to eat. That's what we're told when our hearts are breaking or our grief is raw.

You need to eat. That's what a tired, melancholy Elijah is told in our first reading. God provides a hot cake, the bread of heaven, to nourish Elijah for a forty-day journey.

You need to eat. One man tells of the time he was on a church mission trip to Haiti. Working among desperately poor people in the one of the poorest countries in our hemisphere. When they distributed two large pots of rice dozens of people ran and thrust their little eating bowls toward the pots. In five minutes they emptied two hundred pounds of cooked rice. (William Willimon in *Pulpit Resource*)

You need to eat. They need to eat. And so gratitude for our food leads us to share with the Lakeview Pantry or the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. We have so many choices of what to buy and what to eat. Many have come to value fair trade coffee or other items and to support locally grown food.

We begin to put into practice words from Ephesians: *Be imitators of God. Live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

And because we need to eat, and because our souls continue to hunger for bread that satisfies and food that nourishes, we come again and again to this table. We feed on the bread of life and the cup of salvation, knowing that this is the food of eternal life. That here, in this moment, we are already in the presence of the holy. That the hereafter is already here. That not only is this spiritual food good for us, we are becoming what we eat. We will be food for the world.

It's a miracle: we eat the bread and drink the wine, we take Christ into our very being, our very bodies. And *we* are changed. Changed into the body of Christ.