

August 15, 2021, Sermon

John 6:51-58

Food, Glorious Food

Laura Daly, Licensed Preacher

Lord, give me confidence in the power of your Gospel. Grant me clarity in understanding and proclaiming the truths of your Word. Amen.

Good morning to you and all participating in this service from home. My name is Laura Daly and I have been a member of St. John's since 1994. This is my first sermon, and I am both excited and mindful of the great responsibility that has been entrusted to me. I look forward to your comments in-person or online.

Jesus said, "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.

Ah, Food, Glorious Food.

No living thing can be sustained without it. Food is entwined with all that we are, where our ancestors came from. Food is a bearer of identity. As Anthony Bourdain wrote: "...most cuisines reflect an amalgamation of influences and tell a story of migration and conquest, each flavor representing a sedimentary layer of history."

Food defines us culturally as a people. It provides a link to our family history. We conjure our departed loved ones every time we make one of their signature dishes, bestowing upon them a kind of immortality. We share meals that commemorate events in our lives. We share meals that commemorate our history and religious events.

I lived in a 3-generation household. While my father was Irish, he was outnumbered by my mother's and grandparent's Italian heritage, and our meals hearkened back to both Naples and Sicily. I learned to cook from

my grandmother, from calamari to tomato sauce (which she never called gravy), lasagna from scratch – and, I mean, making the noodles, and cannoli, just to name a few. The kitchen was where my grandmother and I bonded, and we used to cook on Saturday afternoon with the radio tuned to Opera from the Met. I still run Tosca in my mind when I make gnocchi.

Alas, we can also use food to define “otherness” in our neighbors.

We identify groups of people by their traditional menus, either positively or negatively. I was thinking of an event in my life which illustrates that one’s assumption of “other people’s food” can be really, wrong.

In my early twenties, I was dating a boy names Jeffery whose father was Jewish and whose mother was a Philadelphia mainline blueblood and a DAR. There was no getting around these facts when I told my mother, a staunch Catholic, that I was seeing Jeffrey. For her, both parents represented a threat to her beliefs. The fact that Jeff’s father was a published, tenured Political Science professor at Swarthmore, that his uncle was, at the time, curator of painting and sculpture at MOMA, or that his mother could trace her lineage to the Revolution made absolutely no difference. I was fraternizing with the heathens. As she said, it was a sin, a slap in the face of all Christians fed to the lions.

One Saturday, I was invited to Jeff’s house for dinner with his family. My mother, assuming that it would be a Jewish meal (“those people’s food”) it would not be to my liking and urged that I have some dinner before I left. My mother had just made lamb in her usual way, cooked, cooked, and cooked again until it was way past well done. When I arrived at Jeff’s house, they also had lamb – BBQ Lamb, done medium rare with a wonderful, herbed crust. It was a revelation.

The food that Jesus offers is also a revelation. He is our sacrificial lamb, giving his life in service to mankind. We mark his sacrifice for us every time we partake of the Eucharist. Today, we will think about how Jesus transformed the familiar concept of food to create a spiritual meal that built a new community.

“...so whoever eats me will live because of me.”

According to John, Jesus' language in today's Gospel passage becomes more and more literal, to the point where his Jewish audience questions the idea of eating His flesh, seeing it as an affront to Dietary Law, equating it with Cannibalism. Some in the audience walked away.

If we delve into a little bit of the history behind John and the other Gospel writers, there are key differences which may help us understand John's agenda in his retelling of this event.

Mark, Luke, and Matthew did not write about this event. They recount the Last Supper. And what are the words they ascribe to Jesus? We all know them from The Great Thanksgiving celebrated every Sunday: “do this in remembrance of me”.

The Gospel of John, written between 90-100 AD, came after the Gospels of Mark, Luke and Matthew and is unique. It is called the spiritual gospel, as John's motivation was to communicate Jesus' divinity vs. what he said and did. And John was writing at a time when the conflict between Jews and Christians had become an open rift.

In today's passage, the spiritual food Jesus offers is distinct and separate from Jewish Dietary Laws and traditions, creating “otherness”, not a welcoming invitation into a new community.

The Gospel of John, unlike the others, was largely independent of Judaism and in opposition to much of its teaching. This broken relationship between Jews and Christians would, sadly, fester and have future repercussions.

What we can take away from today's Gospel might not be what John had in mind, but what seems to be what Jesus had in mind.

I was struck by the following:

"for my flesh is true food and my blood true drink"

Passover marks Exodus when the blood of the lamb allowed the Jews to save their temporal lives. The manna in the desert was also given to keep their bodies whole. Jesus offers spiritual food, a meal that creates a new community, the Church as the Body of Christ, nourished by true food and drink.

In the many parables that are recounted in Mark, Luke and Matthew, Jesus uses everyday experiences to explain his teachings. The meal he offers us shares some of the same attributes as a temporal meal, but for a higher purpose.

This is not driving up to the McDonald's window for a quick cure for a hunger pang. This is a meal that engages your spiritual hunger, so you are, once again, refreshed and renewed by the promise of forgiveness and salvation.

To eat, to have sustenance, something must be sacrificed. In certain cultures, the animal who is killed for food is thanked by the hunter. We thank Jesus for his sacrifice every time we partake of the Eucharist.

In certain cultures, to eat the body and drink the blood of the sacred totem of the tribe in special ceremony meant sharing the life and partaking of the essence of the sacred object—in so doing, one became like the object. Thus, one became what one worshipped. As applied to Jesus, it becomes symbolically an experience of total surrender to or a taking into one's self of His spirit and His life.

4 The Eucharist is our way of being imbued with the spirit of Jesus, to nourish and bolster our souls for the work we are asked to do in his name.

Jesus' true food and drink binds us across time with all who have been touched by Jesus' teachings and the arc of his life, death, and resurrection.

I do not think Jesus meant for this community to be bound by exclusiveness, to create a world of "us vs. them".

Just before the pandemic, I went to St. Patrick's Cathedral to hear an organ recital. While in the pews, I noticed a bulletin from one of the morning's services. There was a page of rules noting who could and who could not receive communion. So disheartening! As Father Geoff would say, "this is Jesus' table, not ours". It is Jesus who oversees the guest list, not us.

Since we are talking about a meal, and one that involves many, there is an art to being the perfect Host. A perfect host is one who:

Makes you feel welcome and taken care of

Is calm under pressure and creates a calming atmosphere

Is compassionate and understanding, able to be aware of guests' needs

Invites those with different personalities, to mix and mingle. How many times have you been to a dinner party and met someone not part of your usual crowd who then became a friend?

Creates a memorable evening through the sharing of food, drink, and conversation.

One thing I would add – the meal itself need not be over the top as it is merely a catalyst for fellowship. Bill Blass' famous dinners revolved his favorite recipe for...meatloaf.

With these attributes in mind, Jesus is the Holiest of Hosts. He invites all to partake of his true food and drink. There is room for all at His table. The meal is as basic as can be – some bread and a little wine. But this meal is the catalyst for our ongoing efforts to create a world of brotherhood.

Our partaking of the Eucharist is done in remembrance of Jesus and what he represents. This meal is a sign of Jesus' love for us. Howard Thurman, an eminent Afro-American theologian, author, educator, civil rights leader, and philosopher described this love as having no awareness of merit or demerit; having no scale... Love loves; this is its nature. In the taking of the Eucharist, we also accept the gauntlet Jesus has thrown down for us to pick up, to use our refreshed spirit in the service of God and others as He did. The Eucharist is both spiritual and actionable.

No one articulated this better than Jesus himself, in what he regarded as the two greatest commandments:

Thou shalt love thy Lord, thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind", "And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Our acceptance of the Eucharist is acceptance of these two commandments. It is the proper way to thank Jesus for his gift of true food and true drink.

Amen