

Eating More Than Our Share Of Radishes



Matthew 5:1 "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. . . Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy'"

Jesus, we are told, saw the great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon, and he had compassion on them, for, as the scriptures record, "they were like sheep without a shepherd" (9.36), perhaps a hint about the arrest and execution of John the Baptist. The so-called Beatitudes, found in both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, was Jesus' response to the crowd. He had pity on them --- on the

poor, the hungry, on those who wept or mourned, or those were seeking after righteousness, or mercy, and he comforted them.

For almost three years now, we as a people have been struggling with a global pandemic, one that has taken the lives of more than one million of our fellow Americans, leaving a lot of empty chairs at the family table. This pandemic has also caused many of us, and of our friends and neighbors, to suffer, sometimes to be hospitalized, sometimes even with long Covid and with possibly permanent damage, and thus this pandemic has disrupted our lives in so very many ways, seen and unseen.

We have lived through some very uncharted waters with this pandemic, we have had to make some very difficult decisions regarding our own safety and the safety of others around us, often without fully understanding what was happening, often without the skills and insight we needed to make those decisions. Meanwhile we watched our hospitals fill up, we watched as our friends died, we watched as our country run out of ventilators. We watched politicians dismissing the seriousness of this pandemic. We watched others offer false hope and unfounded remedies. We were not sure even how the virus was spreading at first. So, we isolated ourselves in our homes and in our communities. We worked from home, or not all, or else we worked in unsafe conditions.

Now many people are noting that they and others around them are changed by this pandemic, that they and others around them are more impatient, irritable, distracted, and exhausted than before. Many report having trouble with focus and concentration, as well as impulse control related to eating and drinking and drugs. Many of us are still hesitant to wade into crowded spaces, whether masked or unmasked. Many are still reluctant to go back into movie theaters, concert halls, and sport stadiums again.

A recent study has revealed that we, as a people in the post-pandemic world, have become less extroverted, less creative, less agreeable, and less conscientious during this time. The pandemic has changed our personalities some, say the scientists, in big ways and in little ones, and maybe in some ways permanently. "Personality tends to be pretty resistant to change," one researcher said, "It might take something like a global pandemic (to change it)."

These researchers analyzed five dimensions of personality: 1) openness, defined as creativity and unconventionality; 2) agreeableness, or being "trusting and straightforward"; 3) extroversion, or how outgoing a person is; 4) neuroticism, one's tolerance of stress and negative emotions; and 5) conscientiousness, how responsible and organized a person is.

"People want to connect and process together, and we weren't able to do any of that (during the pandemic)," one researcher noted. "People felt really lost because of that," escalating our discomfort as a people now as we have slowly begun reintegrating into past routines, such as working in an office again with our colleagues, and not at our desks at home, alone, or with family.

Younger adults, and especially teens, faced greater restrictions on their activities and experiences that are typical of adolescence and youth, the study concluded. It found that individuals under 30 exhibited the sharpest drops in conscientiousness and agreeableness.

"When your whole world goes into the virtual space, you lose that training ground for being able to be more conscientious," the researcher said, adding that she saw a lot of social anxiety in the younger generations, perhaps because they had not accumulated as many in-person experiences and coping skills as those before them.

Teenagers, perhaps not surprisingly, have expressed an overall negative outlook toward the future and heightened social apprehension. Connection, attachment, and interaction with others, are all critical to developing personality, said the researcher, noting that identity and personality are still being formed in younger teens.

In 1996, psychologist Roy Baumeister conducted a fascinating experiment on will power that may help explain how we are faring these days. Dr. Baumeister invited a large group of people into a room filled with the smell of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies. He sat them at tables and then brought to each table two bowls. One bowl contained radishes and the other warm chocolate chip cookies. Half of the people were told they could eat only the radishes, and to use their will power to avoid eating any of the cookies. The other half of the group were told they could skip the radishes and eat as many cookies as they wished.

Ten minutes later, everyone was led to another room where they were given (unknown to them at the time) an unsolvable geometry problem. The group of people who had just eaten the cookies worked an average of nineteen minutes trying to solve the problem before giving up. The group of radish eaters gave up after only just eight minutes.

Dr. Baumeister concluded that the radish eaters gave up earlier on the math challenge because they were suffering from what he called, "ego depletion," which is just a fancy way of saying they had exhausted their will power, because they refrained from eating the cookies. The will power of the cookie eaters, on the other hand, had not been depleted, and so they were able to concentrate more than twice as long on the

unsolvable math problem. Ego-depletion --- is that what has happened to us during this pandemic?

I believe that the results of this experiment help explain what I hear from so many people regarding the challenges they are experiencing after this pandemic, a pandemic which has affected us all. If you are experiencing any of these challenges, perhaps Dr. Bauermeister's experiment can offer us a little comfort and self-compassion. For the pandemic has forced all of us to give up many of "the cookies" in our lives, those things that bring us the greatest pleasure. The pandemic has forced all of us to give up some of the safety and some of the certainty that we once felt taken for granted in our lives. Our egos were therefore depleted and worn down, our footing, unsure. Many of us had to "eat a lot more radishes" than usual, and our will-power muscles are tired, if not exhausted. In the end, we are a lot more like the poor in spirit, the meek, and the weeping in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, then we used to be. We too are, perhaps, now hungering and thirsting after righteousness more than we used to, or feeling unfairly persecuted or reviled. We too are longing to be filled and to be comforted, we too are longing for the kingdom of God, for peace on earth and goodwill among mankind.

We all can probably use a little more compassion these days for ourselves, and a lot more understanding and patience with

those around us, as we all begin to acknowledge just how much emotional energy we have been using just to get through each day during this pandemic, just to get to this point, wherever that is. So I say to you, blessed are those who are weary and worn, blessed are those who are frightened and unsure, blessed are those who are mourning still and weeping, blessed are the poor in spirit, and the meek, as we all move forward in the days ahead, mindful always of what the prophet Micah wrote: God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God?

So, pass the radishes. We can do this, and we will, one radish at a time – until the day finally comes when we can all once again gather around a table, shoulder to shoulder, faces unmasked, enjoying as many chocolate cookies together as we wish. AMEN.