

Sermon for Sunday, August 19, 2018

True Blood Sermon

In my senior year of Seminary, I took a class on sacraments. As we were coming to our unit on the Eucharist, our professor often would wax poetic about sacramental theology. One day she broke with her usual lecture and told us a story about a woman she next to on the subway. The details aside, the force of that encounter was a quote that I will also never forget... apparently as they got to talking about religion, her metro neighbor said rather boldly: "I need a God I can eat." Dr. Charry shared this with us because she agreed wholeheartedly with that statement and wanted us to chew on it ourselves.

At first this really bothered me. Christians have been accused of cannibalism over the centuries, since we do indeed partake in a ritualistic eating of flesh and drinking of blood. It seems this subway comment was just not concerned with those accusations at all- almost as if my professor was quoting this to say: "I don't care what you call me, this is who my God is, and I am hungry for my Jesus."

John's gospel proclaims equally as boldly that we are supposed to eat and drink the true food and true drink of Christ. We can sidestep the strangeness of these exhortations when we attribute poetic license to these verses. Of course Jesus was not literally saying to come eat him- we are not cannibals, or vampires, and we would never participate in such abhorrent behavior. Jesus was talking about a different kind of meal than the ones we set at our tables to feast upon. Sustenance is more than just a physical reality, and our Rabbi was pushing his listeners to face that fact. Nourishment is offered to us in Christ, but we have to come to the Lord's table. We have to eat and drink what is served there... and then we will have the fullness of life promised to us.

This sounds really nice. But as it sinks in, the comment about needing a God to eat starts to grow in appeal. Spiritual sustenance does not translate very clearly- how are we supposed to eat that flesh and drink that blood? If we are what we eat, then how do we eat more Jesus? Are we supposed to take communion as often as possible, or to deny our actual hunger dieting on the word and Spirit?

I don't know about you but I really struggle with hunger. I love to eat- and I really like to eat some things better than others. My favorite things are not so good for me, and somehow those are the least satisfying foods. Junk food that I love- rocky road ice cream and french fries- these foods do very little to satiate a hungry belly. My tastebuds are doing a happy dance, but my tummy is going to be hungry if that is all I eat. We all know that is the case and despite the occasional "dessert for dinner", I know most of us try to eat well. We seek out foods that will accomplish a lot of goals at once- feed that hunger, fuel our minds, root out illness, strengthen our bodies and somehow also make us thinner. Superfoods, proteins, farm fresh and organic produce, diets galore, most of us invest quite a bit of time, energy and money into what we consume.

For me, the frustrating reality of being a consumer is that it is a constant necessity. I want to cook one good meal and have that be enough- but that only covers 1/3 of the days meal plan. I want to shop once a month and not have to go back to the grocery store once a week, I want to eat a salad and have that atone for all my food sins. Unfortunately I just have to give up the junk and replace it with healthy choices... to keep eating salad...and more salad until I feel

like it's coming out my ears to undo all the ice cream. I have to keep putting more and more good in to outweigh the bad, to undo the bad.

Jesus can't be consumed the way other food can be chewed up, swallowed, and digested. Yes we can eat communion bread and think that is the equivalent, but really it's not. We can't exactly stuff more bread of life into our mouths to undo our sin. I think what Jesus was suggesting when he talked about eating his flesh and drinking his blood was that there is a taste of heaven that we are all invited to enjoy in this life. We can taste it in Christ- it is a sample, an experience we are welcomed into, but it is not exactly a repeat experience we can purchase again and again or just consume again and again.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians, and the author of kings writes about Solomon's dream, and both accounts tell us about the import of discernment. Living wisely is treasured above and beyond living richly. Drinking the living water of righteousness is preferable to drinking too much wine. Though our actions and behaviors are much like a diet in that we have to continuously make good choices, a diet of godly wisdom does not in and of itself make us wholly good. What makes us whole is the taste of true food and drink, that bit of heaven that does so much more for us than we can do for ourselves.

The good news is that we do not have to adhere to a perfect diet of righteousness to inherit eternal life. We only have to come to the Lord's table, to take what is offered to us there, and allow that to shape our actions when we step away from the table. When we falter, we have not undone our good work like ice cream undoes all the salads in the world. Instead, that bread and that wine stick with us for eternity. We have been forgiven and there is no atonement needed for our sins. We have the freedom to make mistakes and to still be welcomed to the table.

With this beautiful invitation to God's kingdom, full of mercy, steadfast love and total redemption, there comes caution. With freedom comes responsibility. So sages like Solomon and Paul know that it is all the more important to live into grace with discernment, to honor the taste of heaven given to us in love by living righteously.

We are called to eat our God, to sample a taste of heaven, so that we might know more than just cerebrally, but physically, how satisfying it feels to be loved wholly and completely. It's kind of like the first time you have had fine wine. After your tongue has delighted in the fruits of the vine so masterfully blended and aged together, you can't in good conscience go back to the cheap stuff. You can sell yourself on the idea that the not so good stuff is actually quite good. But you know it's bad- and you are drinking it all the while wishing that you had a different vintage in your cup! Sampling a bit of heaven is much like that first drink of fine wine. It teaches your heart wisdom. With that taste on our tongues and that holiness on our hearts, we are better able to discern.

I could not help but think of this reference as I was reading John's gospel text for this morning- the HBO show True Blood. This was a really popular show a few years ago, and it came along right around the time of Twilight saga craze when vampire and werewolf stories were trending. I loved this show- even though it kind of scared me each time I watched it, because it was about modern day vampires. The main premise was that the community of vamps, as they were often called, could assimilate into the real world if they agreed not to take their neighbors for dinner. So they created a synthetic blood called "true blood" that allowed them to be fed by science instead of human life.

HBO writers can imagine such fictions for their fairy tale characters, but we have all tasted the true blood of Jesus in Christ's mercy and his love. For that there is no fake version. Once we have tasted the true food and true drink of the Christian covenant, we can't settle for the substitute. And honestly there is no synthetic version out there. As such, we are being called to seek out the realest version of that love in our own lives. We have to make our own fine wine

with the ingredients Christ has given us. We have to make our own diets of righteousness that are born out of true love, not forced piety.

Ideally, it would always be as simple as making a choice between two foods; to eat the salad or the ice cream?!? But life gets a lot harder than that. The task of discernment grows into a complex web of analysis and honestly we sometimes need help making the right choices. In keeping with the vampire fantasy land type scenes, let's talk about Solomon's dream. He has a kind of prophetic vision that drops into a person's spirit as if directly handed over from the Lord.

I love this text because I have been surrounded by talk of dreams since I was little. As I was growing up, my sister would always come to the breakfast table and regale us with stories of her dreams from the night before. This was such a regular occurrence that everyone at the table would kind of roll their eyes thinking here she goes again... I always loved this though. My big sister had big dreams, and I thought maybe that meant something special. I would get excited to share my dreams too, and as we got older we always shared stories with each other about what unfolded in our mind's eye as we slept. When we got old enough to become armchair psychologists, we tried to interpret them. Even though we don't share the breakfast table except on rare occasions anymore, we still relay the strangest dreams to each other via text messages.

Solomon's dream brings me a lot of comfort. I know we are not always as selfless as he was in this instance, but I do relate to his request for discernment, however, if I am really honest with my faith. Faith is so confusing at times. I may think I am living wisely, seeking out the fine wine of life lived for Jesus, making good decisions that reflect my taste for the kingdom of heaven. But then there are times when I am so consumed with doubt, anxiety, insecurity and just plain confusion about what it means to follow after God.

In these times of struggle, I want some tea leaves to read. I want a ouija board to spell out the right answer. I want a dream from God to reveal my next steps, to show me the way of righteousness. We don't get that kind of magic... instead we have bread. We have a God we can eat, that gives a heart for discernment. This doesn't seem like enough! If all we get is food and drink, can't we get a few more food groups in there? The austerity of this meal, the simple genius of the gift of Christ's body and blood, is that it is always enough. It doesn't take much of that bread and wine either... just a little taste, and you know. The same fear that strikes us when we switch out a salad for a burger, or fruit for a cake, is the same fear that comes up when we think the bread of life isn't enough. We have to trust that our hunger is able to satisfied, especially with the true food and true blood.

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