

FIRST CHURCH IN CAMBRIDGE, CONGREGATIONAL, UCC

Eating for Real

A sermon preached by Ellen Rohan Ball

Sunday, August 20, 2006

Think of the last time you were very hungry and ate something you really love. Think of how it tasted just right. Remember the feeling you had after you ate it, the feeling of being perfectly full and satisfied, and how the memory of that food stayed with you and made you perfectly happy. Hold that feeling in your mind and we'll remember it in a little while. I had a meal like this recently. A week ago I was on a vacation at Craigville Beach on Cape Cod where our church has a family camp. The last day we stayed all day at the beach and had lunch at the Snack Shack. I was starving that day, and when I saw someone walk by with a cheeseburger I knew that's what I had to have. I ordered it, carried it back to my beach chair and settled in with it. It smelled great- it was wonderful--perfectly charbroiled, juicy, with drippy cheddar cheese on it. I ate it slowly, bite by bite and I could think about nothing else for a while. I was totally satisfied—it was one of the best meals I've had in a while and I didn't feel hungry for hours. And I think that feeling of being full, of eating good food well cooked is something we can all identify with. We love that feeling, and we crave certain foods and seek to eat the right stuff all the time.

Today's lesson is a very powerful discourse by Jesus to some crowds who were following him, and I think he was speaking right to their stomach. His words today come after other food related events in John's gospel. He's just fed the five thousand and the crowds begin to thicken and follow after Jesus. He suspects the crowd is mostly after him for a free lunch and pleads with one man to stop seeking the bread which will fill him just for a little bit, and to work for the bread that is imperishable. He introduces himself as the Bread of Life, better stuff than the manna in the wilderness of their forefathers. Two weeks ago in our readings the manna was a real and a symbolic sustenance from God for Israel, but today Jesus is identifying himself as bread that must be eaten to abide in us and gain eternal life, or in other words to know him. He uses

symbolic language which shocked and offended his Jewish listeners and now rolling two millennia forward we may still be squirming in our seats when we hear of eating flesh and drinking blood.

All right, so what is Jesus saying in today's reading? Why does he talk about eating his flesh and drinking his blood so directly? This is an especially rich discourse and many doctrines and beliefs have come from it, chiefly for the sacrament of Communion. And these doctrines at first may have been attempts to understand Jesus' words better but in fact I believe have distracted many Christians through the ages from what Jesus may have really been trying to say.

I take these verses as a beautiful, powerful metaphor, a speaking of a mystery of how Jesus abides in us.¹ I think Jesus is trying to tell us something about himself. Something about his divinity and about his humanity. He speaks of himself as being given for the world to give it life, to give us life. He's looking ahead to his death, and anticipating a very real loss of his body, and trying to explain that there's something about this loss of his body that will bring us in union with him. An intimate union, if you will, one that involves one of our favorite body parts, our stomach. Remember that feeling of fullness now? Jesus is trying to give us that in a new and more lasting way. By speaking to our stomach, Jesus is speaking to our very drive to live. As we all know from our grammar school courses, our food enters our mouth, goes to our stomach and through our bowels and is carried by our circulation, and eventually will go to every cell in the body. And in each cell little metabolic fires are burning to give us our very life and breath. Jesus is trying to become an eternal source of food, and life for us. He's talking about something way better than the best manna or the best meal. And the thing that grants us eternal life seems to be his death, the destruction of his body, because by losing his body he will cease to have limits of time and space and can be with you, and me, and everyone we know at the same time.² Kind of like our food when we take it in; it expands, and a small loaf of bread can fuel a whole body for a time. With Jesus' death he can expand and become real in a different way to all humanity. And he promises that

¹ Interpreter's Bible commentary, The Gospel of John, page 573

² Scott, Ernest Findlay: The Literature of the New Testament; Columbia University Press, 1932. p. 255

what is true for him is true for us: that we also will have a new existence, eternal fullness and contentedness.

So that's what I think Jesus is saying; we'll come back to him in a minute and for now I'm interested in the crowds following Jesus—they're very familiar and perhaps a little like us. They are curious, and hungry, and seeking something—a message, a meal, magic tricks, whatever. They follow Jesus from place to place and they seem to be looking for a new way to feel full. Some are put off by his words, and some stay to continue with him. They may taste a little of what Jesus is trying to say but not really get the full idea, and it may be years before they understand the meaning of their hunger and of Jesus' words and invitation. But surely in seeking Jesus they will begin to understand their spiritual hunger and learn how to alleviate it.

So these crowds are a little like us, or a lot like us here this morning. Our lives have periods of hunger and fullness and we meet Jesus and find him in various places, at various stages. At times we'll understand how we're meeting him and at other times we'll be confused and put off. What I do know is that hunger is a good thing and that somehow it is in our scarce times we can encounter Jesus and know his comfort more clearly. Hunger drives us to seek eternal things as we see that temporary things don't last as well.

Let me speak a little of my own. I've been in this church for a long time and I've had involvement in various aspects of church life and it has always been a chief experience and commitment for me. The last few years I've immersed myself in deacons' work and when I started I thought I would be doing the usual assisting at worship and the millions of other things we end up doing. I was actually hungry for something beyond all that, and the work became something more for me; I became hungry for the experience of giving kind words to people in some of their worst moments; of speaking in worship and of saying healing prayers for people in their distress. And I even thought I'd try a sermon- imagine that? And after doing these things I was somehow receiving a feeling of fullness that was stronger than I'd had before, a feeling of being treasured by God that I somehow had to pass on. There's an image I have that loving and ministering to others is like a bending of the love and sustenance that we get from God. Like bringing it around a corner from God to others. And the full feeling

has a kind of lasting quality to it, a real-ness that doesn't seem to come from other sources. And in my hurt and very hungry times I have been able to feel an abiding feeling of fullness from what seemed like Jesus himself and from those around me, from Scripture and from prayer. Again, like a great meal, but better. And then something happens for me that nothing else will do but to work for these real things, this eternal food.

For all of us to get better at choosing eternal food, I suggest we listen to our stomach. We can learn what makes us feel truly full and if you get a fullness that lasts, remember where you got it from and go back there from time to time. Think of your lives, your work and families, and think of how to make your work there eternal. Reflect on your days and remember when your thoughts and actions still left you hungry and you could have acted differently. Think also of prayer; in prayer we can ask for things, we can ask for real gifts, like kindness or patience and we might actually get it. Jesus is truly ready and willing to give himself for us, again and again.

So, pray for our hunger to be strong, and for wisdom to discern eternal food from temporary. Seek Jesus who offers himself as our meal. Listen to our stomach to see when our actions and words bring us a feeling of fullness or if the hunger is still there. And together we can seek to grow in this full feeling from Jesus until we find ourselves serving the world and its struggles, and nothing else will do. That can be our prayer, and may Jesus truly abide in us, Amen.