

## **“You Are What You Eat”**

Psalm 84:1-4, 10-12; John 6:56-69 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might truly abide in you and  
find abundant life in your Word. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Have you ever been unable to feed yourself? I don't mean whether you're a bad cook or not. I'm talking about if you broke both your arms or you were so sick and weak you couldn't lift a spoon up to your lips. Have you ever had to have someone else fill the utensil and hold it up to your mouth so you could partake? Maybe you've done it for a parent or an elderly friend in the hospital. It's hard to know how much to put in the spoon and whether it's gotten in the right way or not, isn't it? But I think we can all agree that it's harder to be the one being fed. The very idea that I might not have the capacity to lift a spoon to my own mouth – (shudder) – that kind of dependence is frightening, isn't it?

And yet, we've all been there. Most of us haven't broken both our arms at the same time, but we were all babies at one point, entirely dependent on someone else to lift nourishment to our little mouths and make sure we swallowed it. Do you think if we remembered it we would walk around embarrassed all the time? Or would we have a healthier relationship with the truths of our human vulnerability because we could remember how we started out? I think our gospel passage today suggests that we would have a stronger relationship with God if we remembered it.

“This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” the disciples murmured. One might assume that they were reacting to Jesus talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood. It’s certainly a graphic and stark way of describing how one enters into relationship with God. And he said it over and over. We only read a couple verses of it, but Jesus had been going on about his flesh being living bread for a good twenty verses before where we picked up in chapter six.

But I think there is something deeper than a gut-level rejection of cannibalism going on here. This entire discourse about the bread of heaven is placed here in chapter six to interpret the “sign” Jesus had just performed when he fed 5000 people on a grassy hillside with five barley loaves and two fish. The teaching we’re being asked to accept, the question we’re being asked is not whether we’re ready to start gnawing on Jesus’ arm. It’s whether we’re ready to confess our dependence on God. We’re being invited to let God feed us, and if we won’t admit we’re hungry, we’re not going to be able to partake of the bread of heaven.

Jesus is offering us the opportunity to abide with him by receiving the bread he offers. He is inviting us become guests at his table – the kind of guests who can’t really reciprocate with a comparable dinner invitation next week – thereby becoming part of the household of God. The question is whether you’re willing to accept an invitation you can’t reciprocate. Are you willing to admit you’re hungry and don’t have any food? This is how we come to abide with Jesus, by accepting our seat at his table and eating our fill of the kind of bread we could never bake ourselves.

Despite how simple that sounds, we humans can make it difficult for all sorts of reasons. Maybe we're too busy to eat. Maybe we want to check out what the other tables are offering, in case something else seems more enticing. Is there some kind of "winner's table" around here with a meal that's mostly protein and a host telling us we can be as super strong as he is? Maybe we've heard the rumor that Jesus' bread is kind of like sour dough because it has the tang of sacrifice within it, and we're not into that. But mostly, I'm guessing we're just convinced that we're perfectly capable of feeding ourselves. "Been doing it my whole life," we mutter, despite the fact that we were helpless babies, one and all, when we arrived here.

It's so interesting to me that this passage that seems so focused on Jesus' mystical divinity – his identity as the Bread of Heaven and the Holy One of God – is actually an invitation to us to embrace our humanity by accepting Jesus' humanity. Does being the Bread of Heaven make Jesus powerful? No. It makes him vulnerable. It means his body will be broken, as only a body can be. Who wants to follow a God like that? Where are the super powers? How can this be what that impressive sign meant? This is a difficult teaching indeed. What happened to the God of Psalm 84, who is a sun and a shield, bestowing favor and honor? Why can't we get an invitation to that God's table, where the promises are about happiness and good things, rather than sacrifice? Can we even believe Jesus is representing that same God? How did we get from there to here? According to John, a fair number of the disciples decided they didn't want to follow this path. Why should we?

And yet. And yet, there is Simon Peter, the biggest blusterer in the Bible, answering with total humility and honesty, when Jesus asks the twelve if they are also going to turn back. “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” Yes, this path might be challenging, asking things of us we didn’t expect to have to give. But where can we go? These words – these words of humility and sacrifice and vulnerability – they are the words of eternal life. The twelve have already eaten this bread and let it shape them. They have taken the steps that, from the outside, probably looked like drinking the kool-aid, and now they have come “to believe and know” Jesus, to abide in him.

You are what you eat, the nutritionists tell us. Do we want to be part of the body of Christ? Are we ready to be fed with the bread of heaven? The bread that tastes like sacrifice? Or does vulnerability offend us? Jesus is telling us that we cannot abide in him without confessing our humanity, our weakness and need. It is a difficult teaching, indeed, but if we can accept that bread, we will discover that it does far more than fill our bellies. The bread is just the invitation, the entry into life in Christ. “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.” Let us partake of the feast that is spread before us, with courage, with humility, and with thanksgiving. Hallelujah and Amen.