

“True Food”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church
11th Sunday after Pentecost – August 16, 2009
John 6: 51-58

When I was in sixth grade I took a cake decorating class. The first day of class we were learning the basics: getting the icing into the pastry bags, choosing the appropriately shaped tip to go on the end of the bag, drawing lines with the icing, using the star tip to make small star shapes of icing. Actually, I’m not sure I even remember what we really learned because I never decorated another cake after taking that class.

What I do remember about that first day is how each of us would find ways to “sneak eat” the icing. The way you sneak eat icing is by messing up on something that you’re making so that then you’re forced to eat your mistake. Or you just squeeze a little icing out onto your waxed paper when the teacher isn’t looking and then scoop it up quickly into your mouth, delighting in the sweetness on your tongue. All morning as we worked, we also ate. It was just so tempting and so sweet. We couldn’t resist.

Well you may already be guessing what happened next. By lunchtime we all felt sick. Our stomachs were weighed down with all that sugary sweetness. We didn’t want to eat any more food at all, and we felt bloated and blah. The next week when we had cake-decorating class, no one ate any icing. We had had enough. We had gained some wisdom by learning that there can be too much of a good thing. We stopped foolishly filling ourselves with fluff and waited for lunch to do our eating.

You see, as good as that icing had tasted going down, it wasn't true food. It didn't have any nutritional content, and though it may have hyped us up for a little while on a sugar high, it didn't provide actual sustenance to keep us going. We had gorged ourselves with this fake food that left no room for the lunch that would have given us the energy we needed for the rest of the day.

I learned that lesson about sneak eating icing, and I didn't make that mistake again. At least not in cake-decorating class. But it seems I have to keep learning that lesson over and over again with other fake foods – like Cheetos or Mounds bars or even my famous Vidalia onion dip. When I'm hungry, I tend to try to satisfy my cravings with food that has no true food in it.

Although the chips and sweets may momentarily fill me up, they don't provide the nutrition I need – they have no staying power. And because I've stuffed my body with these fake foods, there's no room for the true food. It's not that we shouldn't eat any junk food; it's just that eating it won't satisfy our hunger when what we need is true food.

This really isn't a sermon about dieting. And those of you who've had meals with me know that I couldn't possibly preach to anyone about eating more vegetables because I hardly eat any myself. But the way we satisfy our physical hunger sometimes mirrors the way we satisfy our other hungers, including our spiritual hunger. When our stomachs growl with the late afternoon munchies, we frequently turn to food that doesn't nourish. When our souls cry out in hunger, we turn to equally unfulfilling activities - instead of turning to the one who can fill our emptiness and satisfy our hunger.

Jesus says, “I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.” He isn’t implying that he is a loaf of bread, although one commentator suggested that that idea might be the basis of a great Monty Python skit.¹ He’s making the distinction between the manna that God gave to the Hebrew people when they were wandering in the wilderness and himself, the incarnation of God. God gave food to God’s people when they complained of hunger. God didn’t send cake icing or cheetos but manna, the bread from heaven, food that had little taste but sustained the people on their journey. But although manna kept the people going in this life, it couldn’t give them eternal life. It wasn’t living bread. Only Jesus is the living bread. Only Jesus will raise us up on the last day.

All of this about Jesus being bread is hard to understand, and it was no easier for the people listening to Jesus when he said it than it is for us now. Only the day before, these people had witnessed the miracle of Jesus feeding five thousand people with two fish and five loaves of bread. They still have the taste of that bread in their mouths and they are looking for more, although they don’t realize that it’s their spirits that are hungry and not their bellies. They are hungry for the Word of God, and only Jesus can give that to them. They are looking for more signs, more bread, but they don’t realize that what they need is more Jesus. Not because he can work miracles, not so that he can be their king, not so that he can put physical food on their tables each day. They need Jesus because he is the incarnation of God. God is the only one who can fill the emptiness and longing in their souls.

¹ David Ewart, “Holy Textures,” <http://www.holytextures.com/2009/07/john-6-51-58-year-b-pentecost-august-14-august-20-sermon.html>.

The same is true for us. We can certainly stuff our lives full of activities and pursuits that keep us busy. We can over-schedule and over-indulge in all kinds of distracting activities. We can search high and low for the next thing to fill our emptiness. But what we're hungry for, what we're longing for, what we're seeking is Jesus. Jesus is the one who truly feeds us, both here in the meal around this table each week and in our daily lives.

Do you have empty places inside? Places where you hurt or are lonely or are in need of healing and love? Places where you ache with longing, sometimes for something you can't even name. Places which you try to fill with distractions or addictions or busyness or media or partying or reading or caretaking or coffee. Do these empty places ever feel like great, gaping holes that can never be filled? Then invite Jesus in and let him fill up your emptiness with his love.

Of all the things that you do, how many of them are true food for you?

What would it be like to do more of those things?

Ask Jesus to help you fill your life with things that nourish you. Ask Jesus to help you fill your life with him.

Jesus has told us that he is the living bread. If we eat of him we will live forever. He feeds us with true food and true drink. When we allow him to feed us, then he abides in us and we in him. That's where true life is, abiding in Jesus.

So come to the table my sisters and brothers in Christ. Come to the table and feast on the bread of life.