

Bread for the Journey

By The Rev. Dave Duggins

August 23, 2009

I have to watch what I eat these days. So I went to a class to learn how to count calories and carbohydrates. The dietitian stood up in front of the class and said. "Some of the food we eat is enough to have killed most of us sitting here, years ago. Too much red meat is bad. Soft drinks have too much sugar and sodium. Vegetables can be disastrous, and none of us realizes the long-term harm caused by the germs in our drinking water. But there is one food that is the most dangerous of all and we all have, or will, eat it. Can anyone here tell me what food it is that causes the most grief and suffering for years after eating it?" A guy in the front row jumped up and said, "wedding cake."

This story illustrates how easy it is to miss the point—to lose the connection between the message-giver and the message-receiver.

When we read the Gospel it is easy to see that Jesus uses different ways to emphasize or illustrate his point. In the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke parables are central to Jesus' teaching method. The Gospel of John doesn't use parables. In John's gospel Jesus tells us exactly who he is by using metaphors.

One of the definitions I remember from English lit classes and EfM theological reflections is that a metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase that ordinarily describe one thing is used to describe another,

For instance...you are the sunshine of my life...a sea of troubles or a mighty fortress is our God. .

For the past month we listened to Jesus refer to himself metaphorically as the bread of life, or the bread which comes down from heaven.

Jesus compared himself to food. So, why did he say that?

The answer to this question could lay in Jesus' use of a simple food metaphor to help explain the more complex ideas of faith and salvation.

Jesus was starting something new and radical. Something not easily understood by people born, raised and educated under Talmudic law. For thousands of years the reward of salvation for the hebrew faithful was a foreign concept. Their goal was to strive for righteousness in this world. And righteousness was achieved through adherence to a covenant relationship between god and his chosen people.

The radical, new idea that Jesus preached was that salvation is a freely given gift from god. Anyone, Hebrew, Gentile, Roman, Greek—anyone may receive it. Salvation through faith was a foreign idea to the most of the Hebrew people. As a matter of fact it was one of the basis of a major disagreement between the early Christian church fathers, Peter and Paul. Peter, the rock on whom the church was built, didn't agree with the new idea of salvation through faith—but Paul did. But that's a conversation for another day.

So Jesus presented his new concept of salvation by using an every day image to explain a complex idea. Bread—now that's an easy image for most people to connect with. Bread has been an important food item on tables in every civilization for thousands of years.

Here's a little Bible factoid for you to tuck into your hatband and use later to surprise your friends with the depth of your biblical knowledge. The Bible talks about bread in one form or another two hundred and seventeen times. white or brown, wheat or rye, leavened or

uneveled Everyone alive then, and now, understands that bread is necessary to sustain physical life.

So, Jesus used our need for food to make the point that the spiritual food he offered, blessed, broken and given, nourishes and sustains our spiritual life and with his grace, spiritual life leads to salvation.

Using this bread image Jesus connects us to what Marcus Borg calls ...*"the central religious metaphor of our deepest human yearning—hunger and thirst"* But now, as I said earlier, that connection didn't happen for all of the people sitting in the synagogue at Capernaum. Some didn't hear metaphorically. They heard literally:

"Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them"... *"this teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"* Here's the problem of faith in a nutshell. *"this teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"*

There is an old saying about things like ballet dancing... doing double back flips... or having unshakable faith—if it was easy everyone would do it. Faith is hard to find, and harder to pin down. It's difficult for many of us to take something on faith—on a strong conviction with no evidence or tangible proof.

Saint Paul knew about the elusiveness of faith. He said faith is: *"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*

Part of what Jesus was getting at in his use of a food metaphor was that faith is essential to salvation—to attaining the goal...keeping your eyes on the prize.

Sir Edmund Hillary had faith. Sir Edmund Hillary was the first person to successfully climb Mount Everest – he did it; but only after failing several times. After one failure, he shook his fist at the mountain and said: "you have defeated me, but I will return and I will defeat you, because you can't get any bigger, but I can." Sir Edmund had faith that if he kept trying he would eventually conquer Mount Everest. He had faith in himself.

This kind of self-sufficient faith is good. But sometimes we all need help to climb our own personal mountains. When, we rely on the spiritually nourishing powers of the bread of life the balance tips in our favor.

While we are talking about how Jesus used metaphors,

Let's take a moment for an exercise in theological reflection.

Close your eyes for a moment and set your mind free. What are some of the other possibilities for a metaphoric meaning of *"the bread that came down from heaven?"* What does warm, yeasty bread, hot from the oven, symbolize? Remember the smell of home-baked bread?

The warmth of home and family

Bread that nourishes life

Without bread to eat we go hungry

Without heavenly bread we go spiritually hungry

Salvation doesn't depend on ordinary food

Jesus wants to feed us with spiritual bread

To eat some bread brings salvation

These are all good images that can feed us

But is there an image we missed?

The bread that came down from heaven is also an image that foreshadows Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for us and the memory of that sacrifice is celebrated at the Eucharist. Eucharist comes from a Greek word: *eucharístia*. It means gratefulness...thanksgiving. Children in confirmation class learn that the Eucharist is "*the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.*"

In his redemptive death Jesus is bread for us—blessed broken and given.

Here again we see another spiritual food metaphor in the timeless command to proclaim and celebrate our lord's death until he comes again. This is our invitation to take a seat at the table of the last supper.

Whether you call it the holy Eucharist, the Lord 's Supper, holy communion, the divine liturgy or the mass

Our weekly gathering also symbolizes the thankful act of our gathering as god's family...the family of St. Thomas' parish together in the extended Christian family "*óurselves, our souls and bodies...*" we all meet at Christ's table. At this holy meal we sing hymns of praise... proclaim god's word and remember Jesus command ... to "*do this, in remembrance of me.*"

One of my favorite writers on the spiritual life is a Dutch-born Catholic priest named Henry Nouwen. He said "*we all need to eat and drink to stay alive. But having a meal is more than eating and drinking. It is celebrating the gifts of life we share. A meal together is one of the most intimate and sacred human events. Around the table we become vulnerable, filling one another's plates and cups and encouraging one another to eat and drink... much more happens at a meal than satisfying hunger and quenching thirst. Around the table we become family, friends, a community. That is why it is so important to 'set' the table. Flowers, candles, colorful napkins all help us to say to one another. 'this is a very special time for us, let us enjoy it.'*"

And just as Christ cares for us and feeds us in his eternal role as diakonos, or servant minister, the Eucharist is also a reminder of our duty as Christians to make a place at our table for the lonely, the least and the last. When we gather around the holy table we do so with a sense of trust in the true principles that make us a family in Christ.

These are true principles...

Jesus created physical bread when he fed the five thousand.

Jesus is the spiritual bread of life

He is the bread of eternal life offered as a redemptive gift to us to heal our brokenness and make us one with him.

So, when we take a seat at Jesus' table we know where a metaphor ends and his mighty act of redemption begins.

And, when Jesus asks us if his teaching is too hard to accept, we join Peter saying: "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the word of eternal life.*"

That's food for thought...and bread for the journey