

“The Best Thing I Ever Ate” / John 6:56-62, 66-68 / 26 August 2012

I’m thinking that Jesus would not make it as a Presbyterian pastor. He’s always offending people. I mean, everybody knows that you do not tell Jews to drink your blood. Blood is forbidden in the kosher diet, and unless you’re from Northern England, you probably don’t find it at all appetizing. Blood-drinking doesn’t make for polite conversation. Where’s his tact, his diplomacy, his subtlety? Some church growth strategy Jesus has! He tells the people to eat his flesh and drink his blood, and bam! All but twelve of them are gone. Such a distasteful Jesus!

Eat my flesh? Drink my blood? Well, what’s the strangest thing you’ve ever eaten? A few years ago, I was hiking with a friend in late summer, and the guy stopped frequently along the trail to examine mushrooms. After looking them over, he put many of them into his backpack. There were three kinds of mushrooms growing in the woods, all of them edible...he thought. There were Black Trumpets, which look exactly like their name, and Chanterelles, which are delicate-looking, almost lacey with a slight apricot scent, and there were King Bolitas, a large mushroom that looks like a hamburger bun. My friend put them all in his backpack, and when we got home, he offered them to me. Now, I had some faith in my friend’s ability to identify wild mushrooms...but I had to say no. You see, if a forager is uncertain about a species of wild mushroom, there’s a trick to tell if it’s safe or not. They nibble at it, much like a rat will do when trying a new kind of food. They take tiny little quantities of it to see if it makes them sick. If it doesn’t upset their stomach, then they know it’s safe. If it does, well, at least they’ve had the thrill of the hunt. But my wife hasn’t thrown away a food item in all our married life. And I know that if I take home wild mushrooms, she will make use of them.

We’re organic gardeners who compost almost everything. And because we compost, sometimes seeds from the grocery store, or the yard, or the birdfeeder, will end up in our garden soil, and we get all kinds of strange “volunteer” plants in our vegetable garden. These are unfamiliar vegetables that we never planted. This year we got several strange gourd-like things. And the question was, do we treat it like a squash and assume that it’s edible, or do we treat it like a gourd—well—compost it? When I did an Internet search to see if gourds are edible, I found a headline: Ontario Woman Found Semi-Conscious beside a Plate of Maybe Squash. It turned out to be a hoax headline. And unbeknownst to me, those strange gourd-like volunteers did make their way onto our table, and we all survived it.

So, you see, I’m quite certain that I cannot take wild mushrooms home because Michelle would sooner eat poison than throw away food. Food is sacred. Food is life. It doesn’t matter what it is, or how old, or how much everyone hates it, you find a way to use it, and you eat it until it’s all gone. And the only exception to that rule is trans fats. You never eat anything that contains trans fats, because that stuff will kill you!

Well, what is the strangest thing you’ve ever eaten? In your travels. In your college years. As our Food and Faith class discussed the famine in Haiti, how some people are literally eating dirt, I couldn’t help but think about the five big pumpkins growing in that same garden. Every bit of them is edible: the leaves, the stems, the shells, the seeds, and the flesh. I say we don’t throw away food, but in truth, those pumpkins will end up with spooky Halloween faces. You’d only eat them if you didn’t have any other options. Would that I could send them to Haiti, along with all the leftover tomatoes, and zucchinis, and other things I could—but won’t—eat.

Think about it. Putting something into your body is a profoundly personal act, and somehow sacred. It entails trust. It entails choice. We only do it if we feel that the thing we are taking in will somehow meet a need. There's a reason so many cultures say a traditional prayer at mealtimes. It's a reminder that everything we eat was once alive itself, and that life is being transferred to us by means of some mystical exchange. Mealtime prayer is a reminder of how deeply reliant we are on the world around us, the water, the soil, the air. Oh, the deep connectedness of things. Eating is somehow sacred, and that's why there's a table at the front of every church. The holiest act in Christendom is a ritual meal. There are things that are just too sacred to take lightly. There are things that touch our souls so intimately that we treat them only with great care, and we get disgusted when someone deals with those topics in ways that we see as inappropriate. Take children, for example; most people have strong feelings about how kids should be treated and valued. I know a comedian who got booed off stage for making an ill-advised joke about children with cancer. You do not make light of such things. Our society forbids it. There are things that are sacrosanct, like parenthood, and the Holocaust, and religious faith, and money, topics that must be treated with respect and decorum, things that are not subject to flippancy.

And there's food, another sacred thing very close to our hearts. When you're a guest in someone's home, you don't turn up your nose at the food they offer. If you do, then you are symbolically rejecting the person who offers it. Food is more than just nourishment; it's the stuff of life, fraught with symbolism and power. Food is serious stuff—especially in traditional societies. Primitive people, like all those Africans and all those Bible-folk, they know the real, backbreaking labor that goes into producing food. It's not just the thing that sustains life, but it is also the thing that occupies most of their life's waking hours: the cultivation of food, the foraging for it, the trapping of it, the hunting, the processing, the cooking, the eating. Even for us moderns, food is a sacred thing, just like children, one's and native land, and one's faith. You don't mess with it.

And so, Jesus should have known—and surely did know!—that he was treading on thin ice when he told his followers to eat his flesh. He surely knew that he would see his church shrink dramatically when he announced to them, “The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. The one who eats me will live because of me.” Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, “This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?” After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. And Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” And Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of life.”

Jesus is not the sweet guy with the cocker spaniel eyes...but he is the guy with the words of life. Jesus is bound to offend you sooner or later, because he's all about those things that touch so deeply at the core of our being, all those things that you and I just can't take lightly. And unless Jesus offends you occasionally, he's not being Jesus. If your faith has never made you want to give up, or walk away, or call it quits, then your Jesus is entirely too tame to be real. Unless your life of faith costs you something in terms of blood, or sweat, or tears, or boredom, or time, or money, or maybe even some degree of offense from time to time, then your faith is far too tame to do the job it needs to do in the life of the world. Jesus will, and must, offend you...but he has the words of life.

On Food Network, there's a show called "The Best Thing I Ever Ate." I watch it secretly over my wife's shoulder sometimes while I'm pretending to read a book. Food is universally compelling stuff. But what could Jesus possibly mean about eating his flesh? To his hearers' ears, it must have sounded pretty morbid. Why "eat" Jesus?

Well, let's think about 'eating' for just a moment. In fact, let's give it a long moment because we folks in the First World tend to take eating for granted. Say I wake up in the morning and see a few greenish bananas in the kitchen. If the mood takes me, I might grab one, strip back the peel and eat the thing in four bites, then think no more of it. But consider what's taking place when I do that. Some banana tree, faraway in Puerto Rico, was planted and nurtured with sunshine and rain. The tree was nourished by the soil in which it was planted, and that soil is little else than a lot of dead organisms, both plant and animal, that have lived, and flourished, and withered, and died long before the banana tree entered the scene. The tree draws life from things long dead. It's the work of that tree's life to take the sunshine and the rains, and to make new life of them by means of a process that neither the tree nor I understand. It is the work of someone else's life to care for the tree and harvest the bananas. Another person puts a price tag on the farmer's labor and sells the banana. There are loaders, shippers, truckers, inspectors, stock boys. There are a whole host of pencil pushers and middlemen, and a lot of forgotten growers living close to the land, and hand to mouth, on the plantation down in Puerto Rico. And when I choose to eat that banana, when I choose to derive strength and life from it—as silly as it seems—then I am taking part in a whole bunch of other lives, plant lives, and animal lives, and human lives, that are so infinitely beyond my ability to know or to name. When I choose to eat the banana, I am participating in the life of the farmer, and the shipper, and the stock boy, but most importantly, I'm trading the banana tree's life for my own—for banana trees are mowed down like cornstalks at harvest. The tree has done for me something that I cannot do for myself; it has turned light, and water, and dead things into nourishment. And I have taken that life—that nourishment—into myself, and it gives me life.

No wonder we still sense that we need to say a word of grace over our meals, giving thanks for the very life of the world from which we borrow strength from hour to hour, pausing before we eat to recognize our complete and total dependence on that great network of life. When we eat, we identify ourselves with the thing we take in. Eating is an immense web of living things and dying things, all things trading life between them, a wondrous cycle of living and dying, a mystery sacred and profound. No wonder Jesus says, "The one who eats me will live because of me." And no wonder his words are strangely offensive. These "words of life" are also words of death...and new life. And so, again the question: If this is what it means to "eat" something, what does Jesus mean when he says that we need to eat him? Well, your emotional and mental well-being will come from somewhere. You will look to books, and doctors, and Internet sites, and friends to help you find ways to behave in the world. You will look to medications, and physical exercise, and meditation techniques to help you find a place of balance. You will be a "consumer" in the truest sense: You will consume ideologies, both good and bad. Some of those ideologies that you consume will be passing fads, like the Adkins Diet, which was so popular about ten years ago. Others will be downright destructive. And some will turn out to be pretty good stuff to build a life on. When Jesus tells us to eat his flesh and drink his blood, he's saying that we need to make his principles a part of

our mental and emotional diet. We need to chew on the question of what it means to love a difficult neighbor. We must mull over questions of what it means to put self-interest aside. We have to take in the hard, hard truth that the fullest, happiest life comes not to those who seek their own happiness, but the well-being of the world. To feed on Jesus means to take in the strange paradox at the center of the life of faith: that the richest life is the most generous, that life laid down is life gained, that on the other side of tragedy and loss—not just in heaven, but here in this world—there is newness of life. You don't have to be a weird religious fanatic to meditate on the life and the teachings of Jesus. In fact, if religious fanatics really were motivated by the words and ways of Jesus, then they wouldn't be religious fanatics. They would be followers of Jesus. People of all faiths have found meaning and inspiration by dwelling on the teachings of Jesus. He wants us to consume his reality, and become it, in the same way we become what we eat: day-by-day, hour-by-hour, moment-by-moment. "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it." It drove off all but twelve of his followers. And yet these are the words of life. Amen.