

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

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The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Soul Food*”

Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15 (God provides the Israelites with heavenly bread.)
Psalm 78:23-29 (Tell of how God led the Israelites in the desert and fed them with heavenly food.)
Ephesians 4:1-16 (The Church as Christ’s Body is held together through love.)
John 6:24-35 (Jesus is the bread of life. Whoever receives Him will never be spiritually hungry.)

Have you ever stopped to think about how much of our lives revolves around *food* . . . working so we can buy it; shopping for it; preparing it; consuming it; making reservations some place so we don’t have to cook it—and finally, trying not to eat so much of it because we worry about our weight or health.

Do any of you obsessively read those “Nutrition Facts” labels? I confess, I do. Standing for hours in the aisles at the Giant, Shady Maple, or the Dutch-Way, I gaze with furrowed brow, concentrating on the ingredients: How much saturated fat? Sodium? Sugar? Cholesterol? Calories? Preservatives? These days you need a chemist’s degree to buy groceries. But most of us want to eat right, so we can take care of ourselves. We eat “heart smart” or try to watch our sugar levels. Others are so overly preoccupied with their diet and nutrition, they’re living examples of the saying, “you are what you eat.”

Let’s face it. We all put a lot of time and effort into food for our bodies! But how much time and attention do we devote to food for our *souls*? What quantity and quality of *soul food* do we consume? You can go home and open the fridge or your pantry and see all kinds of food for your body. But is your *spiritual* cupboard bare?

It is the crowd’s deep hunger for God which Jesus addresses in today’s Gospel. He offers to satisfy their craving as nothing, and no one, else can. Jesus offers Himself as heavenly food, bread that not only fills the body but also gives abundant and eternal life to the soul. Talk about *nutritional*! Wonder how Jesus’ label would read? Contents: Life: 100 percent of your eternal requirement.

The Rev. Bass Mitchell, a Methodist theologian, observes: “I cannot fully explain it, but when I feast on Christ, consume him, allow him increasingly into my life, that deep hunger begins to be satisfied. I begin to feel whole, for in Him I have found as in no one else or nowhere else the very presence of God!”¹ A daily helping of Christ is as necessary to our souls as nourishment is to our bodies.

When we get extremely hungry, we’re likely to be irritable, possibly even difficult or aggressive. Some clever folks have coined a term for this: “*hangry*.” But once we’re fed, we revert to our usual selves again—kinder, less selfish, and more companionable. Why? Because the strength that was in the food has passed into us and become our strength; it has made us a better, more vital person.

So it is that Christ feeds, sustains, and restores our spent vigor and exhausted energies . . . empowering us to do, and to be, that which, apart from Him, we could not. Jesus is the bread of life, of this life and the next. And “by this sacred food our souls are kept alive and strengthened.”³

Today, and as we read ahead in John, Chapter 6, Jesus invites all who are hungry to feed on Him. Surely, the notion of eating someone’s flesh seems bizarre to us, perhaps even morbid. However, it may not have sounded so strange to Jesus’ listeners.

In the religions of the ancient world, it was common to sacrifice the flesh of an animal by burning it on the altar. As the flesh was never entirely consumed by the flames, part of it was given to the priests as their perquisite, and part was given to the worshippers to make a feast for themselves and their friends. Once the flesh had been offered to the deity, “it was held that [the deity] had entered into it; and therefore when the worshipper ate it, he was literally eating god.”⁴

Jesus teaches that those who hunger spiritually must eat His flesh and drink His blood, a teaching that perhaps would not be *truly* understood until Holy Communion became part of the life of the Early Church. In the Semitic world, “flesh and blood” was a Hebrew way of describing “the whole person.”⁵ And the Bible is clear that Jesus’ flesh is the Divine made human, God incarnate. So much so that First John 4:2,3 declares that any spirit which denies Jesus has come *in the flesh* “is not from God and is the spirit of the antichrist.”

In Jesus, God took upon Himself human life, faced our human situation, struggled with our human problems, battled our human temptations, worked out human relationships.⁶ Christ became One with us, so that we might become united *to Him*.

One Bible scholar writes: “Really to receive from Christ what He has to give us, really to experience His saving power, we must feed on Him . . . must absorb His teaching, His character, His mind, His ways; must appropriate the virtue there is in Him, ‘til His mind becomes our mind and His ways our ways . . . because His power has passed into us and become our power.”⁷ Only when Christ is in us can we say with Saint Paul in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

When we feed upon the life, the strength, and the dynamic vitality that Jesus gives to us, He revitalizes “our lives with His life until we are filled with the [very] life of God.”⁸ In this case, we do want to be what we eat!

Looking ahead to John 6:37, we find Jesus’ assurance that *whenever* we come to Him—early in life, late in life, as horrendous sinners, as overly righteous persons who repent, at the Communion table or the dinner table—He will never drive us away. That means, Jesus will never reject *any* one for *any* reason, for *any* cause *whatsoever*.

In that same verse, Jesus says he will not reject “everything that the Father gives me . . .” Or in some translations, “everyone *whom* the Father gives me.” In other words, Jesus looks at us as *gifts from God!* Despite our incorrigibility and obstinate perverseness, His attitude toward us is the same as parents toward their children. Raising kids requires continual labor, self-sacrifice, thought, and care, yet loving parents feel that life without their children would be vastly poorer and emptier.⁹ In Isaiah 43:4, God declares, “you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.” Imagine! You are God’s gift to Jesus, a gift to be prized and treasured.

In giving us to Christ, God has taken the first step toward a loving relationship. We are not His because of anything we have done. It is God who called us, and would not let us be; He was resolute and persistent until He had His gracious way.”¹⁰

In the Great Depression of the 1930’s, millions of Americans were out of work and many thousands were hungry. In a number of cities, religious groups set up bread lines to feed the hungry. One of these was the Franciscan Monastery on Vine Street in Cincinnati, Ohio. Every day, a generous sandwich of bread and meat was given to hundreds of hungry men and women, who lined up long before the distribution hour of 5:00 pm. The Franciscan brothers who made and wrapped the sandwiches all day long were interested to watch how those down-and-outers received this little meal.

Many accepted with a smile and a thank-you. Others, with head hanging, snatched the small package and shuffled off. Some tore the bag open at once and started eating as they hurried away. Some sat on a curb nearby while others took their gift around the corner to an alley. A few, just a few, opened their bag and then threw the entire contents away, while some, not many, ate the meat but threw the bread away. Most of them ate every last crumb, while . . . some rewrapped and saved a part of it. Many were neat: they dropped the wrapping into a nearby container. Others were litterbugs. Occasionally, some made the sign of the cross before they ate.

The way those hungry unfortunates reacted to that little lunch is a lot like the way Jesus’ listeners received His words in today’s Good News:¹¹ “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” To never again be hungry or thirsty would mean having our two most basic needs in life satisfied. How much *more deeply* does Jesus satisfy our hungry *souls* and thirsty *hearts*?

Father John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote: “By this faith we are saved from all uneasiness of mind, from the anguish of a wounded spirit, from discontent, from fear and sorrow of heart, and from that inexpressible listlessness and weariness, both of the world and of ourselves....”¹²

That is why we must feed on Christ daily in worship, prayer, and Bible reading, on Sundays at His table, and through service to others. To “neglect regular seasons of devotion, to fall out of step with Christ, to lose touch with Him, is to deny [ourselves our] necessary meals. We must [continually feed upon] the living bread or perish.”¹³

This morning, as you approach the altar to receive the Eucharist, I invite you to reflect anew on what you are doing when you approach the Lord’s Table and partake of His heavenly food and drink—the Sacrament of His Body and Blood. Every Eucharist is a special appointment with God, in which we are invited to feed our hungry bodies, hearts, minds, and souls with Jesus Himself.

There are no bread lines in the kingdom of God! Christ’s one and only requirement is that we have some appetite for the soul food He offers. Bring Him that, and eagerly He will do the rest. “A French proverb says, ‘A good meal ought to begin with hunger.’ Come hungry, knowing you will receive Jesus in the Eucharist, hungering to be strengthened by the Bread of Life.”¹⁴

Now, as most of you know, I’m not a Yankee. I grew up in the South, and I really like “soul food”—grits with red-eye gravy, collard greens, black-eyed peas, pork rind chips, corn bread, and so on. But those dishes are hard to find up North, and they don’t last anyway. That’s why I’m glad Jesus is the true and eternal *soul food*. So dig in! *Eat up*, y’all! Amen!

¹ Adapt. Bass Mitchell, <bassm@va.lds.net> 13 August 2000.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 573.

⁴ William Barclay, The Gospel of St. John, Vol. 1, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 221.

⁵ Albert Kirk and Robert E. Obach, A Commentary on the Gospel of John (Paulist Press, 1981), p. 105.

⁶ Barclay, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

⁷ New Interpreter’s Bible p. 571.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 568.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 570.

¹¹ Jerry Fuller, qtd. Arthur Tonne, “Homily for 19th Sunday of the Year,” Five-Minute Homilies on the Gospels of Cycles A,B,C (Hillsboro KS: Multi-Business Press, 1984) p. 99 <padre@tri-lakes.net> (no date).

¹² John Wesley, “Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” Works, Vol. VIII (London: John Mason, 1830), p. 5.

¹³ New Interpreter’s Bible, p. 567.

¹⁴ Fuller, *op. cit.*