

Proper 14B: John 6: 35, 41-51
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Church of the Good Shepherd
August 11, 2024

You Are What You Eat

“You are what you eat.” You’ve probably heard this saying before. But contrary to what a lot of people assume, the saying is not some proverbial wisdom from nutritionists, but rather comes from the German materialist philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. And he thought himself rather clever for coming up with it. You see, in making the claim, “man is what he eats,” Feuerbach sought to put an end to all “idealist” speculations about human nature—all the high-minded claims of humanity’s rationality, creativity, spirituality, and moral sensibility. Forget all that, he argued. What is most important about humanity is the fact that we eat, that we need to eat. When you get right down to it, he claimed, man is just a *material* creature like any other that needs to take in *matter* to stay alive.

While Feuerbach may have thought his claim revolutionary, the fact is that his “man is what he eats” is the most religious idea of humanity. For long before Feuerbach, the same definition of humanity was given in the Bible. In the biblical story of creation, the human is presented, first of all, as a hungry being and the whole world is given as food. “Behold,” God says, “I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food.” God affirms that human beings must eat in order to live. We must take the world into our bodies and transform it into ourselves, into flesh and blood. Man is indeed what he eats. And the whole world is presented as one all-embracing banquet for humanity.

So Feuerbach and the Bible agree, “Man is what he eats.” But *what* does he eat and *why*? Feuerbach doesn't really consider the question. To him and materialists like him, those who think the material world is all there is—to them, eating is purely functional. Food is just food, matter we take in to preserve our biological life. In the Bible, though, the food that man eats, the world he has to take in to live, is given by God, and it is given not just as food, but as *communion with God*. There is no division between the material and the spiritual. All that exists is God's gift to humanity, and it exists to make God known, to make God present to us. It is divine love made tangible, made *life* for humanity. God made all creation as a “sign,” which points to God, and as the means by which his presence and wisdom, love and revelation are experienced. As the psalmist urges us: “O taste and see that the Lord is good.”

So Feuerbach is right, man is a hungry being, but what he is hungry for, the Bible insists, is God. This is in line with what we have been discussing the past couple of weeks: how behind all the hungers of life—not just the hunger for food, but our hunger for purpose, for intimacy, for companionship, for security and status—behind them all is the hunger for God. As Bruce

Marshall put it: “Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel - or a bar or drug den - is looking for God.” All desire is finally a desire for God.

To be sure, humanity is not alone in being hungry, but what makes humanity different—which Feuerbach ignores—is that humans alone are able to bless God for the food and life we receive from him. Only humanity is able not just to receive God's blessing, food, but to respond to that blessing by blessing the One who gives it to us.

This is signified by the fact that in the Garden, the first man is tasked with *naming* the animals. As soon as the animals are created, God brings them to Adam to see what he will call them. “And whatever Adam called every living creature, that was its name.” In the Bible, you understand, a name is much more than a way of distinguishing one thing from another. A name reveals the very essence of a thing, or rather its essence as God's gift. To name a thing is to bring out the meaning and value God gives that thing, to acknowledge its place and function in the world created by God. That's what Adam does with the animals and more broadly with creation, naming things and thereby blessing God for them and in them. Indeed, all our rational, spiritual, linguistic, and creative qualities, which distinguish us from other creatures, they all have as their focus and ultimate fulfillment this capacity to bless God. That's what all our faculties are aimed at—knowing, naming and giving thanks for the world as God's gift.

In this view, the basic definition of man is not that he eats but that he is priest. To quote the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann, “Man stands at the center of the world and brings it all together, unifies it, in this act of blessing God, both receiving the world from God and offering it to God in thanksgiving. And by filling the world with this thanksgiving, this Eucharist, [eucharist means thanksgiving] by this, man transforms his life, the life he receives from the world, into life in God, in *communion with God*. The world was created as the matter, the material of one all-embracing Eucharist, and man was created as the priest of this cosmic sacrament.” So it's not just us ordained people who are priests, that's what humanity as a whole is called to be, was made to be.

Now, this view of human nature is *far* from how Feuerbach and materialists today understand human nature. In their view, the view of many—indeed, most—people today, humanity has no distinctive qualities, no higher calling, no more noble purpose, than to eat. Everything we do—our eating, but also our pursuit of money and power, status and honor, our artistic self-expression, our procreating—all of it is just to keep us alive a little longer. Nothing more, nothing less. There is nothing greater, no higher good than living, that is, surviving. Now, we may, when they think our own position secure, reach out to others to make it a little easier on them, if it makes us look good, raises our status in the eyes of others. But in the end, whether we help others or not doesn't matter. For, in this view, we are not accountable to anyone else. No higher power, no God determines our worth. This is all there is, and that's the end of it.

In the Bible's view, this is not just uncaring. It is a fundamental dereliction of duty, a denial of our vocation, an abdication of our identity as *priests*. This has, in fact, been our problem from the

beginning. It's no accident that the biblical story of the Fall is also centered on food. Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. This fruit was unlike every other fruit in the Garden, as it alone was not offered as food, not given, not blessed by God. Therefore eating it was not communion with God, but with the world alone. The forbidden fruit then becomes the image of the world loved for itself, a world which is opaque, not transparent to God, and eating it is the image of life understood as an end in itself.

After the Fall, we still love, we are still hungry, we remain dependent on that which is outside us, beyond us. But our dependence on the world was intended to be transformed into a relationship with God. Instead, our hunger refers only to the world itself; it stops short of its goal. The world was given to relate us to God, but when it is loved for itself, that relationship is short-circuited, and so breaks down. The world of nature, cut off from the source of life, is a dying world. And eating it is communion not with God, but with death.

I say all this as a preface to today's reading, to give context to the Gospel. As John shows, God has not left us in this fallen, broken down, enslaved state, confused as to the reason for the mysterious hunger in us. Into this fallen world, God sends his son, Jesus, to be "the bread of life," to be food for us, in order to restore our relationship with God, the source of life. This is not a rescue operation as much as it is a restoration, a recovery, a reinstatement to our place in creation, as that part of it that knows God as the source of life and gives thanks to God for that life. In the manifestation of Jesus as the bread of life, we see that we are to live not just for our next meal, or for this life, but for eternal life, in communion with God.

Now, I realize all this talk of "Jesus as bread" and "humanity as cosmic priest" and "food as communion with God" sounds rather high-minded, religious-y, and frankly irrelevant to the rest of our lives. Nice-sounding poetry, maybe, but not anything useful, not something that will fix our lives. But that is where you are wrong. It is precisely here, in our dismissing God and in our seeing the world as opaque, and not shot through with the presence of God, that our lives get so screwed up, where society breaks down. For when we lose our connection with the source of life, when we lose our awareness of God in the world, we no longer know what to live for, no longer know what this hunger is for, and consequently chase after whatever we think will soothe our ache.

That said, our way back is not as simple as "we need to be more mindful," and we should always "aim up" in our actions and approach to life. It's easy, easier than before, to live as if God doesn't matter, to live as "practical atheists," even for Christians. It's not enough just to "know," to acknowledge that God is the source of life; we need to learn how to live that way. This is why, I think, Jesus gave us a ritual, a practice, a sacrament - Holy Eucharist. Jesus gives himself, not just the concept of him but his flesh and blood, in the bread and wine. The Eucharist is divine love made tangible, made food, made life for us. When we receive it, we "taste and see" the world again as God's gift, and we live no longer for our own life but by his.

The Eucharist then is the most important thing we do each week, and it gives us the model, the pattern in which we live the rest of our life. It shows us what it means to live 'eucharistically' outside of Sunday morning, to take life from God and to bless God in our life.

This is what is behind Jesus' claim to be "the bread of life." In that claim, we see an embrace of our nature as hungry beings, as creatures who take our life from God, but who alone among all creatures is able to know God and to bless him for his blessings. To receive Jesus as "the bread of life" is to recover our calling as priests, to live life eucharistically. "Man is what he eats," and by grace, God gives us himself as food. To "eat this bread" is life, true life, *eternal* life, life lived in communion with God, the life Jesus offers for the sake of the world. Thanks be to God!

Note: I am indebted to Fr. Alexander Schmemmann (*For the Life of the World*) for many of the ideas and much of the argument presented in this sermon. His understanding of the sacraments, and Holy Eucharist, in particular are among the most insightful and profound, and he has taught me to see the liturgy as both a practical and a mystical event.