

August 16, 2015

Proper XV

John 6:51-58

How many of you like to cook--- enjoy making meals? Seriously, how many? I want to know so I can make sure you run for vestry. It is important to have good cooks when we have to meet off-site for all day meetings.

If someone were to ask me if I like to cook, my answer would be, "I like to eat." If someone is not cooking for me or I am not able to go out to eat, I make food so I can eat. That is very different from enjoying to cook. That's not to say what I prepare is not tasty sometimes—when I make a fresh tomato sandwich or grill hamburgers or fry up an omelet. But often I just make food—peanut butter and mayo is a "go to" thing for me (I know, not very appealing, but filling—I spent a lot of my college years eating these quick, cheap sandwiches).

But when someone likes to cook, it is a very different deal. Lynn and I are getting a chance to learn that difference based on something we signed up to do recently. The brother of Lauren's boyfriend is the founder of a company called Blue Apron. Have you heard of it? The basic concept is that they will send you all the measured ingredients that you need to make three healthy, good meals in a week. It comes to you in a big, insulated box and you unpack it and find all these food items labeled and these plastic cards with step by step instructions on how to make the meal. It is like a paint by numbers kit for cooking. We love it.

Though Blue Apron makes this process pretty simple, you still have to do the prep work. There is chopping and staging and adding things at the right time and coordinating what you start cooking and what you wait on and so forth. But the cards they provide make it something we can understand and follow. And a funny thing happens. As we do this repeatedly, we get more confidence and more pleasure from preparing these meals as well as eating them.

It wasn't like this at first, though. After our first attempt, Lynn and I were exhausted. It may have been because it was the most difficult meal (so far) for us to prepare. Plus we had Lynn's dad John staying with us and we were cooking something separate for him. There were a lot of things going on in the kitchen that evening and frankly we enjoyed that first meal the least of all the ones we have tried so far. Afterward, I told Lynn that we need the Blue Apron version for lazy (or even lazier) people.

But we tried again and like I said, we found not only the meals themselves but the process of cooking them to be fun, educational, and tasty. For those of you who enjoy cooking, you may be nodding your head and smiling and even thinking, "Well, bless their hearts."

In today's Gospel, Jesus talks about eating. He talks about it in a way thick with meaning for his audience back in that day and if we pay attention, it is thick with meaning for us today.

Some of his words seem puzzling to us, even off putting. It was the case for his contemporaries, too. I believe at least part of the confusion may depend on how we understand eating.

If we understand eating as simply consuming what is given to us, this metaphor of eating living bread made from Jesus' flesh can become too passive as well as strange. Of course the church has traditionally interpreted this passage as a prefiguring of Christ's sacrificial death and its remembrance in the church through the Eucharist. And it is that.

But it is more than that, too. Jesus is inviting us to take part in a meal based on his life, death, and resurrection. And a meal involves many stages beyond what we actually eat. Christ used different images in other Gospels to convey the same underlying message—"Be a part of my life-- and let my life transform your lives." In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me..." In Mark, Jesus said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." And in Luke, Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her." In these passages and in our lives, Jesus is inviting us to come to him and participate in his life. And like preparing a fine meal, a feast, that requires work, sacrifice, and focus.

In the passage today from John, Jesus used the image of inviting us to a meal in which he is our host and our food. At his table, we receive forgiveness of our sins and a deep sense of welcome and acceptance. And as we eat, Jesus' meal makes us hungry for more—something changes in us so that we want to do more than simply eat what is in front of us. We want to help him prepare the meal and serve it to others, so to speak. And when we do, our experience of eating becomes much richer and heartening and even fun.

The ingredients for Jesus' meal are given to us, like the deliveries Lynn and I receive. And like those deliveries, we are still expected to do some work. It is not just easy take out. In practical terms, "keeping the feast" of Christ means that we take the ingredients of his life and person, his death and resurrection seriously and use them with his grace and guidance to feed ourselves and others. What are some examples of Jesus' life as food? There are many, but let's focus on three:

A primary ingredient of Jesus' meal is forgiveness. As we gather at Jesus' table, we know we are forgiven and accepted. But that's not all. Forgiveness is not a solitary meal. The forgiveness we receive is a dish we are to serve to others. God forgives me—how can I not forgive those who have sinned against me?

Another important ingredient in Jesus' meal is community. Jesus does not eat alone. If you remember, it was when Jesus was alone in the wilderness, that the devil tempted him to turn stones to bread, to eat so he could end his hunger. But Jesus resisted. When Jesus made a meal, it was always for others—feeding 5,000 or sharing his last supper. Likewise, the meal we

are called to participate in is always in community. That is where we will find life and caring for ourselves when we are in need and find a way to care for others.

The third ingredient is knowing that Jesus' meal is for the world. What we prepare is not for us alone. The church is not a club that excludes; the church is a kitchen that prepares a meal for others so that all of God's children can sit at his table and eat. This can be done in practical ways like serving food and giving shelters. It can also be done in how we speak up for people whose voices may not be heard.

So I don't know about you, but all this talk of food and meals makes me hungry. In a few minutes we will share in a holy meal together that fills us with God's forgiveness and grace and that also makes us hungry to participate in the life of Christ more and more. Amen.