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“Giving Up Gluttony”

Matthew 6:25-33

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March 19, 2023

Therefore, I tell you, don't worry about your life, what you'll eat or what you'll drink, or about your body, what you'll wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?

And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

Therefore, don't worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For it's the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed God, your heavenly Father, knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Matthew 6:25-33

The first prayer many of us prayed was about food:
"God is great.
God is good.
Let us thank God for our food."

Some of us progressed to:
"Thank you for the world so sweet.
Thank you for the food we eat.

Thank you for the birds that sing.
Thank you, God, for everything.”

One grownup version is:
“Bless the food upon the dishes
as you blessed the loaves and fishes.
Like the sugar in sweet tea,
let us hide ourselves in Thee.”

If you had an older brother, you may have learned this
grace for breakfast:

“Oh, dear God, with a kindly twist,
send down biscuits as big as your fist.”

This prayer sounds like one your favorite aunt might
teach you:

“We humbly ask thy blessing
on the turkey and the dressing,
on the yams and cranberry jelly,
and on the pickles from the deli.
Bless the apple pie and tea.
Bless each and every calorie.
Let us enjoy this big old dinner,
tomorrow we can all get thinner.”

People do not pray for food with the same gusto that
they used to. Maybe it is because for many, food now
seems like the enemy. According to one study, 42 percent
of Americans are “obese.” The remaining 58 percent could
be categorized as “feeling superior.” So, we try the latest
diet: Ketogenic diet, Whole30 diet, Low-FODMAP diet, the
Mediterranean diet, the DASH diet, the MIND diet.

Carol loves me just the way I am but, on rare occasions,

she gently suggests that I have spent a significant portion of my life eating whatever I want. There is 25% more of me than when we got married. So, I have spent some time on the rotation diet (named for people who can no longer rotate).

As I remember it, the author of The Rotation Diet is Dr. Mengele, whose previous books might include A Miserable Life on 1200 Calories a Day. The Rotation Diet, a 21-day diet, is three weeks too long. It promises “quick, comfortable, permanent weight loss” through this “easy to use, no-fail diet.” Dr. Mengele’s next book should have been Dealing with the Anger You Feel Towards the Author of Your Diet Book.

For breakfast I would have ½ grapefruit, ½ banana, and one slice of whole wheat bread. Lunch would be seven tuna fish molecules garnished with low sodium lettuce and two slices of whole wheat bread. Dinner might be three ounces of poached fish, ½ cup of peas, and a cup of some kelp-like plant. Snacks included asparagus, chicory, cabbage, parsley, radish, watercress and escarole. I had never had escarole before. It is endives without the burst of flavor. I could not eat anything with sugar, salt, caffeine, fat, or taste, but I got two apples each day that I could eat any time I wanted! I lost a few pounds, but that particular diet took my will to live faster than it took off any pounds.

The Episcopal priest Robert Capon said of a friend who was counting calories, “His body may or may not lose weight. His soul, however, is sure to wither.”

Our culture is not helpful. We get mixed messages on how and what we should eat. We are told to eat a lot and we are told to be thin. Think about how many ads we see

encouraging us to eat more and how many ads tell us we should look like people who are 20 pounds underweight. Two of the biggest sections in Barnes and Noble are cookbooks and diet books. Irresistible Chocolate Desserts is two shelves away from 10 Ways to Trim Your Tummy.

We get food-obsessed mixed messages every day. We cannot be surprised that eating disorders are something every middle schooler knows about. Ours is a culture where some overeat to the point of destruction, while others suffer from anorexia. We are supposed to eat like royalty and look like starving models. We end up choosing between excess and deficiency. We end up choosing gluttony, because gluttony, according to the most ancient and most scholarly definitions, is any approach to food that hurts us.

So gluttony is not as easy to spot as we think. Gluttony is at work when we buy unhealthy food for our children because we cannot restrain our own appetites for them. Gluttony is keeping foods that we like in the house when someone in the house is not allowed to eat them. Glutton is being so absorbed in eating that we neglect to engage in conversation with others at the table. Gluttony is reaching for a quick fix bag of chips without thinking about it.

And gluttony is the health-food obsessive who lives to eat rather than eats to live. Some thin people have a fussiness about food that is burdensome not only to themselves, but to those around them. Pampering and fretting over ounces is the sin of gluttony, because it is a lack of appreciation for the pleasure of good food. Eating too much and eating too little both keep us from enjoying

what we eat.

Gluttony is the only one of the seven deadly sins Jesus was accused of committing. His critics said he was a glutton. But they were wrong. Jesus knew how to eat.

Halfway through the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: “If you decide to live for God, you won’t fuss about what’s on the table or whether your clothes make you look fat. You won’t care about trendy restaurants. You won’t get caught up in trivialities like who has the best pizza.”

“You won’t worry about how you look. Whether you’re five pounds overweight or ten pounds underweight, you’re wasting every minute you spend in front of the mirror. Has anyone ever gotten younger or taller by fussing at their own reflection?

“Look at the birds, free and unfettered, care free in the love of God. They don’t worry about an extra inch. Yet God cares for them. You count more to God than birds.”

“Instead of counting your instagram likes, take a walk and look at the scarlet poppies. They never primp, but have you ever seen colors so beautiful? Kate Moss in her size zero looks malnourished compared to wild flowers. If God gives such attention to the appearance of flowers—most of which are never even seen—don’t you think God will care for you?”

In the Gospels, Jesus eats his way across Israel—accepting one dinner invitation after another. He says the kingdom of God is a feast.

Food is central to religious faith. In Judaism, nearly everything that passes the lips gets its own blessing. On Rosh Hashanah, Jews eat apples and honey to represent the sweetness of the New Year. The Hebrew Bible is filled

with dietary laws, cooking instructions, and Gordon Ramsay details on how to share a good meal. This is how Isaiah describes the coming banquet: “God will prepare a lavish dinner for all peoples—a feast of rich food, a banquet of aged wine.”

Many of us learned to eat in church. I grew up and out at Baptist potlucks, where all the food is comfort food—green bean casseroles with fried onions on top, macaroni salad (a wonderful oxymoron), chocolate cakes with names like Mississippi mud and Coca-Cola cake that cannot be found in restaurants.

The menu for the heavenly banquet looks different in different churches. Catholics eat fish on Friday. Greek Orthodox churches are famous for baklava. Latter-Day Saints eat funeral potatoes—hash browns mixed with mushroom soup—it is nasty. Plymouth Church is deviled eggs, apple pie, and hot dish casseroles.

Many of us have seen the remarkable movie based on Isak Dinesen’s short story, *Babette’s Feast*. Babette is an extraordinary French chef who flees Paris and comes to Norway to work in the home of two sisters. The sisters are the daughters of a minister who founded a tiny fundamentalist church. The pastor died long ago, and in his absence the church has lost any sense of humor it ever had. They have always been puritanical, but now they are also joyless.

Babette works incognito. She cooks according to the sisters’ recipes, a pathetic looking and sad tasting diet. Then Babette wins the lottery and offers a gift to the church. She wants to cook a French meal for the birthday celebration of the founder of the community. The church

members do not like the idea, but do not know how to gracefully say no.

They cannot imagine partaking of such rich foods, but they reluctantly decide to let Babette cook the meal. They vow not to even think about the food they eat. They will occupy their minds with spiritual things and not taste anything. If they take no pleasure in the meal, then surely God will not disapprove.

At the last minute, an outsider is invited to the feast—a famous general visiting his aunt. The members of the church and the general gather around the table in the sisters' home. They say the grace their founder taught them: "May my food my body maintain."

Throughout the meal the general expresses wonder at the goodness of the food. He takes a spoonful of soup: "This is so strange. I'm eating turtle soup—and what wonderful turtle soup it is!"

The church members usually do not talk much during mealtime, and lately they have not talked much any time, but slowly the conversation begins to flow. They try to keep their vow not to comment on the food that they are determined not to enjoy.

The waiter serves the next dish and the general says, "Incredible. It is Blinis Demidoff."

I am not sure what that is, but it looks delicious.

He looks around at his fellow diners quietly eating Blinis Demidoff without any sign of surprise or approval—as if they had this dish every day.

A woman smiles and comments on the weather. As the meal proceeds, the spirit of the group grows lighter and warmer. They are not only enjoying the food.

They seem to like one another.

They are served the main dish, a quail delicacy that only one chef in the world could have prepared. The general had it once in Paris, and remembers that the dish turned the Parisian Cafe into a love affair in which one no longer distinguished between the physical and the spiritual. Now he is eating this same extraordinary dish in this bland Norwegian home. The general cannot believe his eyes or his taste buds. (Isak Dinesen, *Babette's Feast and Other Anecdotes of Destiny*, New York: Vintage Books, 1988, 3-48).

The meal has become a sacrament. In the goodness of the food, they have experienced the goodness of God.

We may need to be smart enough to eat less, but also smart enough not to think that good health is only possible by giving up the joy of eating. There are times when we should order the salad, but a donut every now and then without worrying about it too much may be good for the soul. Perhaps we should not condemn one another for the contemporary heresy of weighing more than we did when we were twenty.

Our lives are more sacred when we recognize that our food is sacred. Starting our day with a spinach omelet makes it a different day than if we begin with a Nutra Grain candy bar on the way to work. A sandwich at our desk is less holy than lunch with a cherished friend. Sitting down for dinner with someone we love is more Christian than a frozen burrito scarfed down in five minutes.

We need to enjoy our food more, even if we need to eat less of it. We should diet when we have to, but we should eat joyfully. We should eat sensibly when we have

to, and exuberantly when we can. The next time we are offered a bunch of grapes or a piece of pumpkin bread, we should eat slowly and taste the goodness of God.

Every supper is the Lord's Supper. When we sit down for a meal, remember that breaking bread with another is an act of grace. Give what we eat our full attention. Give thanks to God.

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