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Mayflower 3/7/10
55:1-9

Isaiah

RICH FOOD FOR POOR PEOPLE

Let's face it, in the Bible it all comes down to food. In our fast food, take-out, micro-waved, supermarket, shrink-wrapped world we can so easily forget that in the ancient near-east, food was not a product; it was life itself. And food was never fast. It was always slow, and it was never guaranteed – everyone ate what was grown locally, and that meant only when the rains fell and the locusts stayed away. As for water – it didn't come from a tap, but was drawn from a well. People died defending water wells. Hunger was so widespread, that there were religious laws that allowed the poor to pick what was left over in fields after the harvest. It was called gleaning. It was all about food.

Food was spiritual. Half the parables told by Jesus are about seeds and farmers, barns and banquets, wheat and figs. In those days, if you were going to enter into a covenant with someone, you had best feed them first, because the meal itself was part of the covenant. When someone got married, they feasted for days. Food also created a bond with other human beings. Today we say casually, "Is this table taken?" when we need a spot to eat our own food. But the rabbis believed that once you have shared a table and a meal with someone, you can never be strangers again.

Food was offered as a sacrifice in worship ceremonies because it was so valuable; Jesus is tempted in the desert to turn stones into bread because people were starving and bread is not just what comes on the side with a

meal out. It is life or death, every single day. That's why Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread."

In our text from Isaiah this morning, another important use of food (and ironically the danger of food) is lifted up. Isaiah writes during the Babylonian exile, when the Jews were in captivity and far from home. He dreams of a day when all will be fed, and all who are thirsty will drink. And guess what? It will be free! "Come", the great prophet writes, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk! Heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare . . . I will renew with you the everlasting covenant, the benefits assured to David."

Sounds good, as if the ultimate free lunch is the messianic banquet, but there is a warning in Isaiah's words. While in captivity, he worries that when their captors feed them royal food, they will own them. That may be the true meaning of the familiar phrase, "There's no free lunch." When someone else buys, we usually feel obligated in some way. We have accepted their food; now we are more likely to submit to their demands or surrender to their agenda.

It's no surprise that when you want to win someone over, you invite them to a feast. When lobbyists want to seal the deal, or pharmaceutical companies want to speed a drug to market or fast-track a bill that will increase their profits, the affairs are always held at high-end golf resorts or day-spas where before anything happens, everyone eats and drinks. Then the hand that feeds you expects a favor in return. It's the oldest transaction on earth.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann put it simply: "Whoever feeds, owns." And even more so in the ancient middle east. Food always came with a price. Eat royal bread and think royal thoughts. Eat royal bread and embrace royal thoughts." Be careful with whom you feast lest you discover later that you paid the check with your soul after all.

We miss the pathos in this warning because none of us are starving. Just imagine this warning by the prophet to those who are literally slaves and at the mercy of their masters. People had to eat, so can you blame

those who thought that meant humoring their captors a bit. I mean, if it means life or death I say, pass the figs. Does this mean we have to act like Babylonians for one night and forget our own covenants and priorities? Well, check out this appetizer! Does it mean that we may be forgetting what it means to go home and renew our own covenant and look forward to the true messianic banquet? Well, save me a leg of lamb and pass the wine and we'll try to remember. But for now let's eat until the pain is gone. And don't forget the dancing girls — nothing will help ease the pain like those Babylonian dancing girls!

Israel's great prophet has issued both an invitation and a warning. Don't forget what God's shalom will look like. Rich food for poor people, and nobody gets turned away because they can't afford it. In the kingdom, there will be enough food for everyone. That's why, in the life of faith, *feeding the hungry* is the baseline ethic. It is so fundamental to the idea of being civilized and compassionate that without free food for the hungry nobody can claim to be in covenant with anything or anyone.

I put access to health care right up there also. Just think about it. If we can't feed the hungry among us, and we can't make certain that a sick child can go to see a doctor, then what are we, really? Who cares if we have the greatest health care system in the world if millions will never be able to access it? At a tea party rally recently an angry woman said, "I don't care if other people don't have health care. If they don't have it, that's their problem. They should just go out and get it. It's not my problem."

The passage makes me think of two polarities in religion, one pure and the other dishonest and manipulative. Many charities that feed people offer that food based on conversion to a particular religious doctrine or teaching. If you want to eat, then accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal savior. This is profoundly ironic because someone who says that assumes that Jesus would have cared what hungry people believed before he fed them?

Or before he healed them for that matter. Three weeks ago our own Lori Walke preached her very first sermon for the Norman congregation

and it was wonderful. I read that sermon, as did Chris, and we both had the same reaction: “We’re in trouble.”

One of my favorite lines in that sermon, which I told Lori straight away I intended to steal at my earliest convenience, was this one: “Apparently Jesus *preferred* people with pre-existing conditions.”

So, if you want to act like Jesus, you feed and heal for free. And then if someone wants to talk with you about why you did it for free you can tell that person about all that you have received for free, like your whole life, like the incredible abundance of food that surrounds you because you can buy it after someone else grows it. Like the first food you took from your mother’s breast, and all the free food that the world has put before you ever since. And one thing is certain. The richer you are, the more free food you get. In fact, the richer you are, the less you pay for anything because that’s how business is done.

The world is set up so that the more you have, the less you pay, but Isaiah isn’t promising rich food for rich people. Food is at the heart of the reign of God because food is not just sustenance. Its presence is a gift, and our attitude about sharing it is a test of faith. If we can’t feed the hungry and heal the sick then we have utterly and completely failed to serve the God of love we say we believe in.

This is exactly the ethic that causes Mayflower folk to feed the homeless in the 363 group. It’s a free lunch with no strings attached. When it comes to the Mayflower Medical Outreach, there has never been, nor will there ever be, a theological litmus test before the homeless are fed or the children in Jinotega are given hearing aids or the surgery necessary to correct their hearing loss.

We bring food assuming people are hungry. We go to Nicaragua assuming that in the second-poorest country in the Western hemisphere, children who can’t see a doctor, or who are not informed about health choices and their consequences, will need help. But nobody from Mayflower has ever connected food or healing with salvation or membership in our church. And we never will.

Isaiah begins, “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” That word, “Ho” is a particle that was sometimes used to get the attention of the dead in funeral rituals. In fact, scholars believe that this whole passage, with its image of a free banquet, may be modeled on ritual meals for the dead in which the dead were summoned to partake in the food offering.

Isaiah could well be addressing his people in exile as if they are dead. “Listen,” he calls out, “so that you may live.”

But the heart of the passage to me is this question: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Think of this lament addressed to the United States in 2010.

Americans spent 100 billion dollars gambling last year, and 16 billion for elective plastic surgery. We spend 41 billion a year on pets, 10 billion on movies, and almost 12 billion dollars playing video games. In other words, we spend more to amuse ourselves than we spend to educate our children.

The price of our addiction to the military industrial complex exceeds that of all other nations put together, and yet there are more poor people among us with every passing day. Perhaps *we are dead*, for all practical purposes, and we should hear this lament from Isaiah as addressed to all of us who spend money on that which is not bread, and who labor for that which does not satisfy. And that would indeed be all of us.

The story of every nation and every people is this: we make covenants to care for each other, and then we break them because we care only about ourselves. We may be sitting safely at home, and yet we may be spiritually in exile. That’s when the spirit of the living God raises up prophets to speak truth to power, to tell us what we would rather not hear: that God’s thoughts are not our thoughts even on our best days. That God’s ways are not our ways, no matter how clever we think we are, or how safely we have made the idea of the divine into an intellectual abstraction instead of an existential indictment.

America stands at a crossroads now, and must decide what we want to do and be, besides people who love to talk about God all the time. We have more religious chatter in this land, and less actual compassion, than in places where the name of God is never mentioned. At the Olympics recently, a visitor from America was actually overheard asking a Canadian: “Is it true that here in Canada you have a Canadian health care system?”

In the end, it’s really all about coming home, whether one’s exile is physical or spiritual or both. Let me close by asking you this. Do you remember, as a child when you played late into the evening and as it grew dark you heard the voice of your mother or father calling you to supper? That sound, ringing through the darkness, reminded you that somebody cared, that somebody had prepared food, and was now calling you home to eat it. If that is not the most beautiful sound in all creation, then listen to Isaiah’s version:

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their ways, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Come home. There is rich food on the table. And there’s enough for everyone.

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, March 7, 2010

Lord of Life, we come before you, whether out of habit or obligation, or a deep yearning for a more authentic life, to ask a simple, three part question: where did we come from, where are we going, and to Whom do we belong?

The way we answer this question will make all the difference in the world. If we are born of love, then our highest obligation is to love. If we have no destination higher than pleasure, then we will amuse ourselves to death. If we worship nothing more sublime than our own ego and its insatiable appetite for glory, then we will self-destruct.

So we have gathered in a place we call church, and to be honest, in such places people have often gone away empty, for there has been no real food to eat. And yet if we did church like Jesus, everyone would be fed, with some left over. And we would know the answer to our question. We come from love, we will return to love, and we belong to Love.

Therefore to live, let us love.

Amen.



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