

Second Sunday in Lent
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Vicar Sarah Derrick
March 17, 2019

“We are the only species who cooks, and when we learned to cook is when we became truly human.” Michael Pollan begins Netflix series *Cooked* in a similar way to how he begins his book. *Cooked* is a four-part series where Pollan takes food enthusiasts, lovers of sociology, anthropology or all of the above back to the origins of the cooking. He bases each episode around one of the four great transformations of cooking, which line up with the four elements of nature: Fire, Water, Air, and Earth.

Through his episode on Fire, he looks at two regions: the wilderness bush of Australia with the Martu people and the rural American South with farmers and pit masters to explore how fire is essential to cooking food, but more than that, how fire is essential in bringing people together.

The Martu are a people deeply connected to the land and deeply connected to the power of fire for cooking and hunting. Not unlike our own history here in the US, the indigenous Martu people were removed by white Australians and placed in Mission schools and residences. It has not been until recently that some Martu have been able to return to their land, reconnecting with traditions of burning off portions of the land to hunt, and cooking what they gather around a fire. One Martu woman tells of the rise in heart disease and diabetes that took hold of her people once they were removed from the land. Now, those who have been able to return to the land have experienced a significant decrease in these diseases linked to their eating. She says, “Fire for us is special... it is healing”.

The women have a special role with the fire. It is their job to move through the land that has been burned to hunt for the staple food in their diet—iguanas. The women gather iguanas, cook them over an open fire, and return from the wilderness to share with family in friends.

Pollan makes the argument that if human beings lost the ability to have fire, we would all die. Because we would not survive without being able to cook. In the wild, we could not survive on raw foods alone; cooking is in our DNA.

The whole premise of *Cooked* is that we have lost touch with how food gets to our plate; we have declared “progress” which has commodified the essential methods of cooking and hidden them away from us. Fire has disappeared from our lives, but civilization began around a fire.

Our readings today begin with a fire. In the two covenant stories (which put together in our periscope today make it seem like it is one story, but really, these are two stories together) we hear God promise two things to Abraham (or Abram as he is still called at this point in the story) descendants that are as numerous as the stars in the sky, and the promise of land for these descendants in a vision of a flame passing between carcasses of meat. So we have the promise of descendants and the promise of land, and all this is solidified with a vision of fire.

When we think about Abraham’s descendants, who do we think of?

Jews, certainly. Christians, yes. And Muslims, right? Because Muslims are descendants of Ishmael, the son Abraham had with his slave Hagar.

The descendants are numerous, so many that—like the stars in the night sky—it is near impossible to count them all, and yet I wonder if even still we have forgotten our shared origins around a flame—a promise from God for a land for *all* Abraham’s descendants.

It would seem like we continue to forget this shared origin around a flame. Just this week there was yet another horrendous act of terrorism in a New Zealand mosque, claiming the lives of fifty of our Muslim siblings.

Here in the US, hate crimes based on ethnic and religious prejudice continue to rise. We are a people who have forgotten our shared origins around a fire.

Michael Pollan also heads to the American South to learn what he refers to as the closest thing to primordial cooking: barbecue in the South, whole hogs over wood smoked for almost an entire day.

(And while he might say this is the closest thing we have to primordial cooking, I’ll say that this is the closest thing we have to that strange vision from Genesis—split carcasses with some flames passing through... I’ll tell y’all one thing. Southerners love some religious marketing tactics, and it is a shame if no Southern barbecue joint has done something with this yet. Please stay with me through the end of the sermon, but also let me know if you come up with a witty name after the service.)

Pollan spends some time with Ed Mitchell, an African American pit master in Eastern North Carolina. He talks about how he learned the art of barbecuing, describing as a rite of passage, learning techniques that came over with his ancestors on slave ships.

Mitchell describes barbecue as something that has at times in history crossed racial barriers in the South. At the tobacco harvest, white and black men had to work together because of the very narrow window of time you had to get leaves picked. Harvesting included drying the leaves with coals and a fire, and so it was only natural to put a pig on to feed that many people. In a time when black slaves were not allowed to do participate in life together with white free-people, it was time when everyone sat down together at the end of the harvest and ate... together around the cooking fire.

In our gospel today, we hear Jesus lament the division of the city toward which he is moving. Jesus calls Jerusalem the city who kills prophets and stones those who are sent to it, knowing that the time of his death in the city is drawing closer. And here, we hear a yearning from Jesus to gather *all* the children of the city together, like a hen gathers her chickens. Perhaps Jesus was walking toward a city who had forgotten its origins around that fire we hear of in Genesis. In a social and political climate that had become so splintered by religious factions vying for power, Jesus proclaims a hope for the divided to be gathered together.

One thing we can glean from *Cooked* is that getting back in touch with the origins of cooking takes practice. We have become so distanced from the process that it takes time and intention to learn and to practice. And honestly, it is similar when we think about gathering together as people of God—all people together. We have moved so far from that first human gathering around a fire. And yet it is the meal from the fire that invites us to practice—to practice vulnerability, hospitality, love, and respect. Gathering around the fire to eat, it is what makes us know we are human. And ours is a God who gathers us like a nurturing and protective mother. We practice gathering here, we practice sitting down and sharing a meal, so that we might leave this place to

do the very same thing. And as we go out from here we trust that while the world might at times forget its origins around a fire, God will never forget or abandon her commitment to gather us, again and again.