

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Did you catch what Jesus said? “The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my *flesh*.” With a statement like that, it’s no wonder that early Christians were called cannibals. After reading that verse, I thought there had to be another translation. There had to be a way to make it seem less shocking. So, I dug a bit deeper into the Greek. And it turns out that ... there’s not. The Greek word the dictionary explains that it’s the “soft substance which covers the bones and it permeated with blood.” So, yep, flesh. The bread Jesus gives is his flesh. But, what does that actually mean?

Some commentators see the word ‘flesh’ as connecting to Communion (you know, when we say, “body of Christ given for you”); others think of this as a reference to Jesus’s sacrificial death on the cross—a death like the ritual killing of an unblemished lamb; still others point back the phrase “the word became flesh” from the beginning of John’s gospel, and argue that the author is stressing the incarnational reality of Christ. Theologian Gail Ramshaw goes on to remind us that in Jewish tradition, the Torah was described as if it were bread. The devout consumed the teachings of the prophet; the word of God filled human need. Jesus intensified the metaphoric tradition of describing the Torah as bread by applying it to himself. He is the word of God, he has come down from God, his is the teaching of life, he is the bread, he will fill the world with life.

And, at first glance, it's such an odd metaphor. But it's also a revealing metaphor. Have you heard the expression "you are what you eat?" You know, it's when the doctor reminds you that if you're only eating fast food you're not likely to get the nutrients needed for a healthy body. A healthy diet is filled with nutrient rich foods and moderation with sweets. It's a principle that we sometimes follow well and other times we slip. In those moments where our diet isn't so great, we can more easily feel sick, have inflammation throughout our bodies, and don't feel fully alive. Yet, when we're able to have a balanced diet and give our bodies the nutrients it desires, then we can flourish and live. So too, our spiritual bodies need consistent nutrition. Our spirit needs to be exposed to rich, deep, and vast understandings that strengthen our body. Our spirit sometimes needs to digest ideas and engage in work that can feel painful while still being productive and life-giving. Our spirit needs regular nourishment that will bring about an abundance of life.

That's where today's reading from Ephesians tries to step in. Ephesians is a letter that was probably widely circulated throughout the early church. While it most likely wasn't written by the apostle Paul, it's meant to be an individual or a community's response to Paul's teaching about Jesus Christ. In today's reading, we heard that their diet was focused on devouring truth. They were obsessed with using language that builds others up and is rooted grace. In following Jesus, this community would feast on kindness, tenderness, and forgiveness. Yet, that feast was not always their favorites. It wasn't always cupcakes and ice cream. Sometimes, kindness feels more like steamed broccoli, tenderness tastes like plain oatmeal, and forgiveness is chicken and rice. What is spiritually healthy for us isn't always meant to taste like cake. Spiritual food is that which nourishes us and keeps

us full, fed, and fueled. Spiritual food isn't always a feast, but it is something that our bodies crave.

Over the last month or two, I have needed this reminder. I feel like my spiritual practices have been fast food for my spirit. It's been quick prayers, skipping meditation, and a lot of frustration. I think many of us feel similarly. I hear it when impatience towards the changing COVID restrictions to protect the vulnerable. I feel it when anger takes the wheel. I notice it as gun violence is on the rise and the marches for injustice have disappeared. It's as if we have emerged from our homes forgetting how to talk to engage with others, neglecting to respect the other, and failing to embrace the mantra from Ephesians to "be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

I wonder what the world would be like if we ate that verse every day. What if you and I put that phrase on the mirror as we brushed our teeth and repeated it as a spiritual mantra. If we did and assuming that you listen to your dentist, you'd be spiritually nurturing yourself for four minutes a day. Then, imagine that that daily nourishment turned into a commitment to double-down on worship. A pledge to care for your spirit for fifty minutes each week. To pause and sit down in a pew or on your couch and take your mind off the things of the world and listen, engage, and ponder the nutrients for your spirit. And after the spiritual snacks for four minutes a day and the 50-minute meal a week, I know you'll begin to feel your spirit come alive. You'll begin to feel energy to put your actions into alignment with God's vision to love your neighbor as yourself. Then, you might just realize what a wonderful gift you have been given, so you'll give of that gift to support those in

need. Or you might find that you're craving more of that spiritual goodness, and you'll want to participate in Bible study, or put your faith in action as your march for justice and peace.

You see, this weird metaphor of eating Christ's flesh holds so much truth. We are what we eat. Or, maybe, we become what we eat. If we binge on self-hatred, anger, annoyance, and selfishness, we will become what we eat. Yet, if we eat of the feast that Christ has provided, if we notice God's presence in every person regardless of vaccination status, if we love all people, and if we are generous, then we will literally embody Christ. We will literally have eaten of Christ's essence, and we will become reflections of Christ and experience the life that only God can give.

Well, all this talk about food is making me hungry. So, I'm going to leave us here. I'm going to leave us as we sit at the banquet table—God's table of love and grace. A table where Christ is inviting us to eat and to nourish ourselves with the essence of God. To eat a balanced diet of love and grace that is good for our spirit. A meal that is freely given by our God so that we might fully live. Amen.