

August 2, 2015
Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Spirituality of Food

INTRODUCTION to SCRIPTURE

In communion today we give thanks for all the ways we are fed - by the grain of the earth and the fruit of the vine, and by the presence of the Spirit among us. I've been thinking about how food and spirit go together. For fun I googled "Spirituality of Food," and got over 58 million results. It's not a new idea. In fact all food and food practices are part of all religious traditions: Communion in Christianity, the Seder in Judaism, the fasting of Ramadan in Islam, the begging bowl of Buddhist monks, and the list goes on. Food is a spiritual matter, not only in its symbolism, but also in its tangible reality.

In Jewish tradition Psalm 136, today's reading, is called the "Great Hallel," meaning the great praise, and is traditionally sung at the end of the Passover meal. Considering the reference in the gospels of Matthew and Mark that Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn together at the end of Last Supper, it is likely that it was this psalm.

Today, we will all participate in the reading of this antiphonal psalm. So, please turn to pg. 712 in the back of the New Century Hymnal. In each verse Hector will read the opening part of the verse and we will all respond with the indented line, which is the same each time, saying, "for God's steadfast love endures forever." We will not be doing the sung response today.

SERMON

Saying grace together over food is the most common form of prayer that we share with others outside of worship. It is rooted in the gratitude expressed in today's psalm, "Thank you, God. Thank you for the food given to all flesh."

Assuming that a child lives at home for 18 years and that the family eats together once a day, that's over 6,500 opportunities to pause to give thanks. A built-in opportunity for an attitude of gratitude. If you find your family feels awkward about saying grace together, especially as your children get older, we have found that just pausing in silence, allowing everyone to say thanks in his or her own way, can be very meaningful.

Too often in our overly busy culture, not only do we not stop to give thanks we often don't stop to even notice what we're eating. Food is simply "fuel" for the body "machine". We see this perspective in one of the earliest video games, Pacman, where the person playing is simply a yellow mouth that devours everything it encounters. Chomp, chomp, chomp.

I remember times when our children were young and our family was so busy I resented having to take time to deal with food. I found it an intrusion on other more "important" matters. I've come to regret that attitude and see it as both nutritionally and spiritually problematic. It's a very un-integrated view of creation and life itself. It is very disrespectful of our humanity.

We are not machines. We are large living organisms made up of many smaller living organisms, some of which we would rather not think about. We then take into our bodies other living organisms which become a part of us in a very complex process of life. No matter where we are on the vegan to omnivore spectrum, all eating depends on the death of other living matter. We become what we eat.

It is an informative spiritual assessment to pay close attention to what is going into our bodies. In order to survive, we have to take nutrients into our bodies, in one way or another, in order to survive. However, when we pay close attention we realize that we don't just eat to survive. We find that we also eat, or don't eat, to soothe ourselves and/or to suppress our feelings. And sometimes that gets problematic. A Dagwood sandwich, chocolate, alcohol, purging. Name your poison. Sometimes we have to find out what's "eating us," emotionally and spiritually, so we can be free to eat well. Eating well is a spiritual practice.

Yet, eating well is not always a strictly personal decision. There are cultural, corporate and political influences. I became more aware of this while we were living in Phoenix. The Pima Indians of the Gila River Community in Arizona have the highest rate of diabetes of any population in the world. They have type 2 diabetes, which is strongly influenced by diet and genetics. For centuries this population, which has minimal European genetic influence, lived primarily on beans and rice. They were lean and healthy. On the rare occasion they had high sugar, high fat foods they ate them to store up for when food was scarce.

After Anglos took over in the southwest and the Pimas were restricted to tribal lands, they began to eat differently, a modern agribusiness processed diet, including government surplus food. The results have been very damaging with high rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes.

Ironically, just as our modern diet of processed food and an increasingly sedentary lifestyle has resulted in more and more people struggling with weight gain, the fashion and advertising industry have increasingly idealized the thin body. I was reminded of this last week when our 15 year old niece was visiting. In our conversation she talked about how the girls at her school spend so much time examining and comparing their bodies to see if they are thin enough. What does this do to the spirit?

Young men, on the other hand, often get messages that they need to be super muscular. I once watched a 26 year old man die in a cardiac unit as a result of the steroids he'd been putting into his body. He was into body building. His death happened in a teaching hospital, so most of the people responding to the code were about his age, including me. The medical team couldn't bring themselves to stop trying to resuscitate him, even though they knew he was dead. It wasn't until an older doctor, probably the age I am now, showed up and told them to stop that they were able to do so. Sitting with his wife that night was a sobering experience for me.

There are a multitude of moral and ethical issues around food for which we all hold some responsibility – food production, food waste, and food distribution.

Yet today I want to pose a very personal question –

How is it with your spirit and food?

Advice about food is a multi-billion dollar industry in this country. Some of the advice is good. Some of it is junk. Some of it is downright dangerous. Partly that's true because every person's experience with food is different - for genetic, cultural, and spiritual reasons. I think the best advice from a spiritual perspective is to pay close attention to your own body and see how it actually responds to food. This can be a spiritual practice in itself.

Living in Brunswick is a great place to be if you are paying attention to food, even if you don't like to prepare it yourself. Between here and the river there are about 25 places to buy something to eat. And that's not counting the food carts on the mall. Just across the street is *Lemongrass*, which is owned by First Parish Church member Gillian Watt and her husband.

If you do like or are learning to like preparing your own food, we are blessed with farmer's markets on the mall and out at Crystal Springs Farm. If you are looking for suggestions about food preparation, Christine Rudalevige, from right here at First Parish, has a column in the Portland Press Herald, including today's paper. We are definitely a "foodie" town.

So how is it with your spirit and food?

In recent years I've become more aware that I don't do well with refined sugar. I can eat fruit all day long and do great, but refined sugar is another matter. I've never been one who likes a lot of sweets in the form of cake or cookies but ice

cream or gelato taste mighty good. This summer I've been paying particular attention to my refined sugar intake. I already know it tastes good going in, but I've been assessing more about how it makes me feel afterwards. I've learned that it not only can make me sluggish in the following hours, but I can feel agitated even the next day. I do become what I eat.

Paying attention to my food is putting me more in touch with my spirit. And vice versa. Now when I've feeling low or agitated, I not only ask, "What am I upset about?", but I also ask, "What have I been eating?"

As the psalmist says, "Thank God for food." And thank God for the ways it nourishes our bodies not only for physical activity but also for the ways it keeps us spiritually well and alive.

So I invite you to spend some time today and in the weeks ahead reflecting on the question,

How is it with your spirit and food?