

Fast Food

Isaiah 58

CWZepp, BWCOB, November 11, 2012

For those of us who have grown up always having plenty to eat, there is perhaps nothing so easy to take for granted as food. It is an ordinary, unremarkable, something we do several times a day. And so we often, probably usually, eat without giving a passing thought to what we eat, where it comes from, how we eat, with whom we eat, or how our food nourishes our bodies. We eat not only at mealtimes, nor even only when we are hungry. We eat while watching TV, while quickly moving from one activity to the other, while riding in the car, while attending a sporting event. We seldom give much thought to what we put into our mouths, or to how or when we put it in there. We just do it.

We are generally oblivious to the significance of the food we consume. But when we take the time to reflect on the food we eat, there is little else that binds us in so direct a way to the rest of the world. No life can exist on its own. All of creation is nurtured by the rays of the sun that warm the earth, cause the plants to grow, and provide the cycles of the seasons. The soil provides nutrients for growth, and rain comes down to water the earth, cultivating the seeds that find their way into the soil and providing the water that sustains all of life. And every single thing we eat, at its root, has at one time or another been a living thing. Fruits and vegetables, breads and pastas – all come from the living produce of the earth. Meat of any kind is in fact the flesh of a once living being. Our very lives are sustained by the life of the world. Without the benefit of other life, we would not have food, and we could not live.

During my youth, I was quite fascinated by Native American culture, and one of the things that made a profound impression on me during those years was learning that the Lakota Sioux, and perhaps other tribes as well, would offer a prayer of thanks to an animal that they would kill while hunting. It was basically a way of saying thanks to another creature which surrendered its life for the sake of human survival. It was a way of honoring the reality that life has a cost, and that in order for one to eat and continue to live, an animal had just died.

Learning about that practice touched me deeply. Even though I grew up in a home where we said a prayer before eating meals, and even though I was raised on a farm where we raised food of both the plant and animal variety, I hadn't really ever stopped to think about the connection between life and death, the circle that bound my sustenance with the life of another. Once that light bulb was turned on, I became much more aware of what I was eating, where it came from, and what living thing had to die to feed me. And it spilled over into other areas of my life as well. For a time, I said a silent prayer of thankfulness every time I used a paper towel or toilet paper – knowing that a dead tree was behind that use. I have to tell you, it made me use a lot fewer paper towels – and to this day, when I think about it, I would rather dry my hands on my pants than contribute to the death of another tree. It just isn't worth it.

When food comes to our table, it is thanks to the providence of God for all creation – a circle of life that sustains and nourishes us all, and one that we can't take lightly when we think about it. But it is also not untouched by human hands. The food that comes to our tables has passed

through the hands of many other people along the way as well. There are the farmers who tended the soil, planted the seeds, and harvested the produce. There are the ones who tended to the animals that provide our meat. There are the butchers and the bakers, the truck drivers and the grocers, the buyers, the cooks, and the servers. When we pray and ask God to bless the hands that brought food to our table, the list can be quite long indeed.

There are few better ways to remember our connection to one another and to all creation than to mindfully share a meal together. But one possible way is to **not** eat together. This weekend, as you have already heard, some of our youth are fasting, willingly going without solid food for 30 hours. While doing so, they are becoming a bit more aware, perhaps painfully aware, of the significance of food. But that is not all. In addition to not eating, they have been learning about hunger and poverty in our world. While they have chosen not to eat for one day, they have been asked to reflect on our neighbors near and far who struggle to find enough to eat every day.

One of the best explanations that I have heard of the purpose of fasting is that when you fast, you say “no” to one thing so that you can say “yes” to something else. So the important question that ought to accompany any fasting is not just what you are giving up – what you are saying “no” to – but also what you are taking on – what you are saying “yes” to.

In Isaiah 58, we find a suggestion. In short, it is about saying “no” to a life that is all about one’s self, and saying “yes” to a life that is about others. It is about saying “no” to religious practice that only serves one’s own interests, and saying “yes” to religious practice that serves the needs of humanity. It is about saying “no” to self-centeredness, and saying “yes” to interdependence.

If we are mindful of its significance, food – whether we are eating or not eating – is one of the things that best illustrates and incarnates this reality. Food connects us together with creation and with one another in ways that little else does. As we ingest the atoms and the molecules that comprise our food and literally make them a part of us, we embody the reality that we are bound together with all creation.

But food also illustrates the brokenness of our world. Some have too much, many have too little. Many of us here fight obesity, many others around the world are perpetually malnourished. Many of us have no idea where our food actually comes from, where and how it is grown, who harvested the grain and ground the flour to make our bread, who killed the cow to make our hamburger. We give little thought to how much of a precious gift food is.

Our congregation is involved in many, many programs aimed at overcoming some of this disconnect and brokenness related to poverty and hunger. From the CROP walk to the Food Pantry, from the Backpack program to New Community Project, from connecting with Bread for the World to write letters to government representatives to making and hosting meals for the homeless during HARTS week, we have done and are doing a lot to combat hunger in our community and in our world.

But if you are like me, it is hard to connect these public actions and collective efforts with my personal lifestyle and everyday choices. I can donate food to the food pantry, or walk in the CROP walk without asking much of myself. I can host a meal for the homeless or write a letter to a Senator and check a good deed off my to do list. Sometimes I, at least, need something more to stir my soul and wake me out of complacency, and help me see how I am a part of and connected to the brokenness of our world.

So what if our food became that something more for us? What if, with every bite we took, we were mindful of the circle of life that binds us together with all creation? What if, every time we brought a fork to our lips, we remembered the many hands that brought that food to our table? What if, every time we felt the satisfaction of a full stomach, we also felt the suffering of our sisters and brothers with empty stomachs? What if our eating reminded us both of God's provision and also that we live in a world that is not as God intends?

Perhaps then our eating – our food – could give birth to another kind of fast – a fast where we say “no” to a world of injustice where some feast and many starve, where some have way more than enough and many can't even scrape to get by. And in saying “no”, we would say “yes” to playing our part in bringing about God's Shalom – the world as God intended it – a world of justice, freedom, and plenty, a world where no one goes hungry, and everyone has everything they need. That would be a sort of “fast food” – and it wouldn't just be good for me, but good for all of us.

May it be.

Prayers of the People

O God, today we are acutely mindful of the bonds that connect us with one another. After a long and sometimes brutal election season, our country and our community has gone to the polls, cast our votes, and chosen leaders to direct our common life together. Some of us were pleased with the outcomes, some of us were distressed, but either way, we are thankful to live in a place and time where we can play a part in deciding our fate, where we can debate the right course for our nation and our communities and participate in the process of discerning that together, where we can write letters to representatives to express our beliefs and convictions and try to persuade them to act as we believe is right and good. And now that we have settled on leadership for the next season of our life together, we pray now for our elected leaders, from our national president to our local town council. Give them wisdom and strength to govern for the good of all in our communities, our nation and our world.

God as we think about our communities, our nation, and our world, we are mindful especially this day:

- Of those who are unemployed or underemployed, who struggle to make ends meet
- Of individuals and families who go to bed hungry, and lack adequate nutrition
- Of veterans who have given themselves in service to our nation, and are too often forgotten and neglected when they get home
- Of those fleeing from violence and conflict around the world
- Of those who live and work in unjust conditions, and those bound by oppression of all kinds
- Of those who are ravaged by preventable diseases
- Of those who want desperately to get a decent education but lack the means or opportunity

O God, as we think about all of these, our brothers and sisters, we know that we are bound together with them. Forgive us when we forget that. Empower us to reach out and help where we can, and enable us to use the freedom and the influence we have in this country to pursue life, liberty, and happiness not just for ourselves, but for all of your children and all of your creation. For all our sisters and brothers, grant us compassion so that we might be instruments of your love in the world.

Amen.