

Milk and Honey

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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Where do you even start a sermon on the connections between food and religion? Food is a universal experience and its inclusion in the rituals of celebration, mourning and meaning making are found everywhere. Its references of metaphor and scriptural allusion infuse our language. A land flowing with milk and honey is not a land rich in natural resources, but a land rich in spirit, that land of promise overflowing with joy and divine abundance. Food is sacramental: taken as the communion between human and the divine. Food is sacrificial: offered to the Gods as an act of praise, contrition, petition. Food is covenantal: bringing us to a shared meal.

As the PBS series *The Meaning of Food* shared that “a piece of cake is never so simple as a piece of cake. It could mark the beginning of life or the end—or any one of the myriad messy points in between. Making a cake could be an act of grace and memory: Grandma’s pound cake recipe served at her wake. A piece of cake might be as naïve and direct as a child’s birthday cake ablaze with candles of hope. Make a wish we say. Or cake is the devil’s food, a temptation to gluttonous lust. It translates as reward... or shame... or memories of home.” But a piece of cake is never so simple as a piece of cake.

Think of the holidays, the holy days, in your life or in each year. I will guess that for the moments we mark on our calendars we have not only traditions but also expectations around food. The Thanksgiving turkey pulls us into an acknowledgement of bounty and gratitude. The Christmas cake is celebration of new life and hope. Valentine’s chocolates act an expression of sentiment and caring. Burgers on a July grill speak of easy carefree days of rest—Sabbath. I imagine we all have very particular expectations for how each of those times will go. For some the turkey has to have chestnut stuffing, while others don’t so much care what’s in the turkey as that it comes with candied yams. Christmas could mean candy canes or plum pudding or, for one family I know, Chinese takeout. Food is a universal experience, but in its particularity food also defines the individual. Not just in our taste preferences but in what we culturally define as food. Just as food can gather us at the table, what is served on that table may define us as outside the circle of community.

My friend Pat tells the story of meeting her prospective mother-in-law for the first time. In an effort to get to know her, her fiancé’s mom, a daughter of the South, asked, “What kind of biscuits do your people make?” Were they drop biscuits or rolled biscuits? The kind of biscuits you make declares who your people are. But Pat is from Minnesota and her people don’t make biscuits at all. She was at a loss to connect where connection was sought. This is a pretty benign example, but if you have ever watched those travel shows where the host travels the globe eating not only at fine restaurants but consuming some of the most suspect local foods from street vendors you will recognize that one man’s food is another man’s nightmare. And so we classify people by what they eat. Those who eat tamales and bunuelos are different from those who eat fish and chips or those eat obento or poi or those who enjoy a croissant with their morning

coffee. We instill in food the culture of our tribes to bring us together, but also to draw lines of separation.

Just as food is a marker of cultural belonging, it can be one of religious belonging. The things we have talked about in this series on the senses are fairly universal across religions. We have seen how crosses come up as visual touchstones in almost every tradition, ancient and modern. The smells of incense and the sounds of drums translate from tradition to tradition. But rituals and traditions around food don't really have the same level of commonality. As universal a concept as it is that all people eat and all cultures use food in some sort of meaning making way, there is no one single food or use of food that religions share. Maybe bread comes the closest. Even in a wholly secular context, the great food writer M. F. K. Fisher said that "There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken." A companion is someone we share bread with – from *com* meaning "together" and *panis* meaning "bread." Bread brings us together. And for the religions of the book—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—bread brings us together with God.

In Christianity we immediately think of the sacrament of communion, one of the most central rites that extends across almost all Christian sects. The ritual of communion arose out the agape feast of the early Christian church, a meal shared before a worship service that brought the community into right relationship so that they could worship together. As our reading expressed, you cannot successfully bake with a bad attitude. So, too, you cannot successfully worship together with a bad attitude, nor can you comfortably break bread with animosity toward each other. Until you can sit at the table together you are not prepared to worship together. What you put into bread you get out of it. What you put into community you get out of it.

Eventually the meaning of the shared meal changed from a community coming together to a more singular sense of an individual coming into relationship with God. The agape meal became communion. [Biblical fun fact for today: the name of the town where Jesus was born, Bethlehem, means "House of Bread." Bread and holy connection.]

In Judaism, bread is perhaps even more strongly held as a symbol of divine connection. There is a text, Pirke Avot, that says "Without bread, there is no Torah. Without Torah, there is no bread." In Judaism a table spread with food is not considered a meal unless it includes bread. There will be one blessing for all the fruits and vegetables of a meal, but a whole series of blessings for the bread. The 20th century rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explained that this is because fruits and vegetables are gifts from God. We may plant a seed, but we don't cause the fruit to form. With bread, however, a great deal of human interaction is required: growing and reaping, threshing and milling, mixing and baking. Rabbi Soloveitchik held that the more you put into something the more spiritual or sacred it becomes. Further, it usually requires a whole group of people to accomplish all the steps of making bread. Rarely does one person accomplish the whole series of steps alone. What you put into bread you get out of it. What you put into community you get out of it.

In Islam, bread is also treated with reverence. As the general reference to all food, to waste bread is to show disrespect for Allah, the Source of all sustenance. One Arabic term for bread is *Aish* meaning "life" itself. Before kneading the dough, the baker offers the blessing of "*Bismallah*" (in

the name of God) and again before putting it in the oven, “*Bismallah*.” What you put into bread you get out of it. What you put into community you get out of it.

Bread is, of course, not the only food seen to have holy connection or used in religious ritual. Indeed, to abstain from eating is in many instances a holy act. The sense of taste, the idea of nourishment, is closely connected to the spirit. This series on the senses has largely focused on how we use sound, sight and smell, taste and touch in our religious services. It is one of the hallmarks of liberal theology that the things of the everyday are also the things of theology, and so it is somewhat surprising perhaps that we do not bring the senses into our worship more than we do.

We do, on occasion, bring food into our services, and to share food after the service is still a strong component of our Sundays together. To gather around the potluck table is a common occurrence in the life of our community. But today, in particular, I want to emphasize that the connection between the sensual and the spiritual is not only about bringing the sensual into the church but also about bringing the spiritual out into the world. We do the majority of our tasting, our interacting with food, outside the church. Can we carry the same spiritual attention and intention that we bring to church out into our daily lives as we savor our meals? Can those meals feed us spiritually, as well as physically?

The picture on the front of your order of service this morning speaks to that idea of melding the sacred and the profane in such a way that what we hope to attend to in church we can attend to in our daily bread. In the 1950s and 60s, a Roman Catholic nun, Sister Mary Corita Kent, became known for her bold graphic prints. At a time when Vatican II hoped to connect religion more deeply into people’s everyday lives, Corita Kent’s art melded religious themes of social justice with popular advertising and literary works. One of her most controversial pieces, repurposes a DelMonte canned tomato ad campaign to refer to the Virgin Mary as “the juiciest tomato of them all.”

The piece on your order of service, “Enriched Bread,” combines the Wonder Bread slogan “builds strong bodies 12 ways” with the words of Albert Camus:

Great ideas, it has been said, come into the world as gently as doves. Perhaps then if we listen attentively, we shall hear, amid the uproar of empires and nations, a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope. Some will say this hope lies in a nation; others, in a man. I believe rather that it is awakened, revived, nourished by millions of ordinary individuals whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history. As a result, there shines forth fleetingly the ever threatened truth that each and every man, on the foundation of his own sufferings and joys, builds for all.

At her death in 1986, Harvard theologian Harvey Cox said this of Kent: “The world of signs and sales slogans and plastic containers was not, for her, an empty wasteland. It was the dough out of which she baked the bread of life.” Can we do as much? Can we take the things of our everyday and combine them with those things that hold deepest meaning for us? Can we make the dinner table a place of communion, creating intentional and sacred community? Can a simple bowl of cereal absorb the intentionality of spiritual practice? Is growing your own lettuce an act of

communion with the earth? Is baking bread a sacred and communal act? What you put into bread you get out of it. What you put into community you get out of it.

Namaste.
Por lo tanto puede ser.

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