

God has a history of meeting people with food in desolate places. The Israelites ate manna in the desert. Elijah was fed by an angel under a broom tree in the desert. The people in our Gospel were running out of their towns to a desolate place to encounter God. And there on the ground, in the middle of nowhere, their needs were met. You guessed it; with food.

Food is such a great image. And Jesus makes tremendous use of it. Looking at the whole of Scripture, God's saving work is compared to a feast as much as to anything else. Today, we are literally fed with food imagery. God summoned our first parents to eat of every tree of the garden, except one. And Jesus feeds the thousands. Notice that in both, food is offered at no cost. You don't labor for this feast. In the Garden, or in the wilderness, our Lord feeds two, or a multitude; with a Divine provision that more than meets the need. No sweaty brows in Eden, or that desolate place, where a taste of Eden is restored.

We are taught this throughout Scripture. And very clearly in our Divine Worship. The Lord's Supper is not just a metaphor, but the actualization of His Divine provision. Jesus invites us to dine upon Him. We take the Holy One and the holiness of God into ourselves. The old adage of "you are what you eat" becomes more and more true of us as we return to His table time and again. We call it a foretaste of the feast to come which is heaven. It is the very forgiveness of sins of which we partake at this table. So you could say: Once again, God meets his people with food in desolate places.

Let's consider for a moment, the powerful impact of food on our lives. Maybe by doing so, we can see in it, the very Gospel message. Let's start with the obvious.

We need food to survive. The calories and the nutrients we take into ourselves through eating are essential to the sustaining of this bodily life.

which is Jesus. Without Jesus, the author of life, we are but a coffee pot that has been unplugged. We might be warm for a while, but before long we achieve ambient temperature. We call that...death.

Food is essential. Food is essential to joy. Just try throwing a party without food. It doesn't work. Especially for us Lutherans! Christ not only makes us alive, but he gives us a great joy as well. The Scriptures don't invite us to enjoy a tasteless protein bar which has all the necessary nutrients. Nor are we served some military style ration which sustains us, but tastes terrible. God invites us to a feast, something to *enjoy*. We *celebrate* the Lord's Supper, we "lift up our hearts," we rejoice at the words of absolution. We can rejoice even in terrible circumstances because this is not the end of our story. Jesus is the beginning, middle, and end of our story. Because He is life. He is essential to joy.

Food is an entry point into our community. Women often joke that the way into a man's heart is through his stomach. You may have also heard the saying that: "An Army marches on its stomach". Successful salesmen take their clients to lunch. They know it's harder to say no to someone after sharing a meal together. Indeed there is more to it than this. Salesmen also take clients to lunch because it's an opportunity to have exclusive time together. But that also works here in this place. The Lord would rather have you eating with him than anyone else. The dynamics of this don't necessarily make sense when you think about it rationally, but it is so. I don't know why food makes us more sociable. But Jesus enters our life, and spends time with us through eating. I think of Martin Luther's table prayer in this regard. Come Lord Jesus be our guest...

Food unites us *and* reunites us. Our most important family events usually center around a meal. Reunions, Weddings, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and many more events almost always involve a feast of some sort. So too does the grace of God unite us into His holy people. We no longer can

education which may have once divided me from my neighbor is rendered meaningless in light of the fact that the Son of God died for each one of us. And He meets, and unites us, around His table.

Food communicates important things. Our first experience of love from our mother was really as she fed us. A primordial effect on us. We give chocolates to our sweetie on Valentine's Day. Don't try giving her a can of beans. What would that communicate!? Your mom probably expressed her love for you by feeding you when you came home from college. And when someone dies in our close community, one of the questions the family has to answer is how many they think will stay for the meal? We bring the widow or widower something to eat as continuing care. It tells that person we grieve with them and are concerned for them. When each of my parents died, I was astounded at the amount of food which was given to us. The food of Jesus is God's tangible, personal, and satisfying expression of His dear love for us. Food communicates important things.

But let's not forget that the devil has tried to work against all of this. Food is no longer to be enjoyed by people. Since the day he coerced Adam and Eve to veer from God's loving provision of food; calories have turned into an enemy we cut, count and cry about. We have become such critics of cuisine that we can hardly enjoy that meal our mom would set before us when we came home from college on break. It is as though the imagery of food has been spoiled by the overabundance of it. Our refrigerators are full and so when Jesus says heaven is a feast, we think of the last time we were at Old Country Buffet and say "no thanks".

A chef was being interviewed who said that we really enjoy only the first three bites of a dish. After that a law of diminishing returns takes over. So he serves multi-course meals but each course is tiny, always leaving the customer wanting more. A seat at his restaurant in San Francisco will

deal for the eating experience to be just right. We'll go to great lengths to fight against the devil's schemes to ruin what is meant for good.

Sometimes though, we just give up the fight. And so...

We can abuse food. A *great* good can become a *great* problem in our lives. People with eating disorders eat food not for sustenance, but food carries with it psychological attachments. The abuse of our relationship with God also has great potential to be problematic in our whole life. The person who chugs a couple gallons of Mountain Dew every day will eventually be diabetic. We can be so focused on the sweetness or the other aspects, that we miss the real nutritive value of food. A shallow drinking of our Lord in His Word is not nearly enough for our survival.

I don't have to tell you this, but Hungry people are grumpy people. In today's language: We get "Hangry". Likewise a community that has no relationship with God, or a thin/tasteless relationship with Him, are often a very crabby people. Or at best, a dysfunctional lot. Food makes families function better. It enhances Joy as I said before. Families that eat together are incredibly important for the health and wellbeing of the young people who sit at those tables. And it ripples out from there. Teachers will tell you that they can easily pick out of a classroom the students that regularly don't eat with their families.

Food has other connotations for us. Turkey is eaten on Thanksgiving Day. Hot cross buns on the weekend of Easter. God gave bitter herbs and unleavened bread to remind the people of the Exodus. There are certain foods that our mom can prepare which will immediately bring us back to our childhood. And there are foods which simply are essential to certain days, events, or relationships. God masterfully employs food as a way to lock in festivals, events, even teaching.

And lastly: Food is important for our sense of beauty. What I eat has to taste, feel, look, smell, even sound right when I dine. Science could

needs. But we'd likely starve. My daughter Anneliese and I used to watch the competitive cooking shows where they are under the clock to make something out of a set of random ingredients, like Maine lobster, hot dogs, frozen lemonade and potato chips. One or more chefs actually pull it off. And the creative beauty of a tasteful, visually appealing dish always amazes me. Beautiful cuisine often comes from ingredients that are not so pretty on their own. So too, Jesus brings beauty to my life, and to our community, when on our own...we're not so pretty.

Suffice it to say: food is not just nutrients, it is far more. We are dealing with something mysterious in all this. It doesn't all make perfect sense. And yet, we can see it all around us. God has created in food an almost perfect metaphor for the Gospel. But no longer a metaphor, Jesus blesses his people in our Gospel with a multiplying supply of real bread and real fish.

And far beyond any description, metaphor or otherwise, it is no wonder that Jesus, when speaking of his own body and blood, says "take and eat...take and drink". A fulfillment of biblical prophecy calling us to eat what is good, and delight in the richest of fare! Come and dine on your Lord, at His table, prepared, for you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.