

You Are What You Eat

John 6:24-35

Sid Batts

First Presbyterian Church
Greensboro, North Carolina

March 18, 2018

Fifth Sunday in Lent

It was a nineteenth century French doctor who is given credit for first expressing the idea that “we are what we eat.” In his 1826 book, *Physiology of Taste: Meditations of Transcendent Gastronomy*, Doctor Savarin wrote:

“Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.”

In other words, “You are what you eat.” Since then, a lot of people have been saying that what we eat has a direct effect on our body and physical health. However, now we are hearing from the field of mental health that what we eat also influences our mental and emotional health. Says a medical professor at Columbia University, “By helping people shape their diets, we can improve their mental health.”

Others in the field say, “An unhealthy diet is a risk factor for depression and anxiety.”

Yes, we are what we eat.

And when it comes to anxiety, we should pay attention to the connection between eating and our emotional health. Why? Because for years, it has been *America First* when it comes to stress and anxiety, compared to both developed countries and even those in under developed countries.

The *American Psychological Association* makes an annual report called *Stress in America*. It’s based on thousands of surveys. Again, American stress was high in last year’s report. So what are the things that bring Americans stress?

The number one stressor for Americans last year was anxiety over “the state of the nation.” In a close second were perennial favorites: money and work.

It is no wonder that many have called our time *the age of anxiety*.

Of course, severe anxiety is a mental health issue, and the introduction of anti-anxiety drugs has been a blessing to the millions of people who suffer from it. But the high level of anxiety most of us experience is less about brain chemistry and more about our spiritual chemistry. Marcus Borg, a biblical scholar and theologian, once said that the issue facing most American Christians in the twenty-first century is less about faith versus doubt, and more about trust versus anxiety.

I believe he was absolutely right.

I

Of course anxiety is as old as human history...and it is anxiety which was going on in an the Old Testament story we know well. We remember in the Exodus story Moses has led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, and then they find themselves out in the desert wilderness with nothing to eat. They murmur, moan and complain to Moses that they were better off back in slavery. The conversation has a hint of, "What have you done for me lately?"

"So what that we were slaves doing the backbreaking work for Pharaoh... and that you parted the Red Sea and led us away from blood-thirsty soldiers. What are you going to do for us today, Moses, as we sit here with nothing to eat?"

What follows is the miracle of the manna, bread from heaven. But it comes with an important lesson... a lesson of trust. Why is that? Well, the manna happened to be time-sensitive, and it rotted by day's end. Therefore, the faithful have to trust that each day more manna will arrive. It is a textbook spiritual lesson on overcoming anxiety with trust. The people of God have to trust..... God.

Then we fast forward to find something similar going on between Jesus and his followers. To put Jesus' story into context, we have to go back to what happened just prior to today's gospel lesson.

When we go back we find the story of Jesus' feeding the five thousand with a few loaves and a couple of fish. A rather amazing story don't you think?

Then, the disciples are in a boat and Jesus comes to them walking on water. Another amazing story.

In today's story the crowd goes looking for Jesus and finds him on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. When they find him, what they want is more... more to eat, but more than

that...they want a sign, another miracle, to help them believe that Jesus is the one from God.

Hmmmm? They have seen Jesus turn a few loaves and fish into a feast for thousands... and seen Jesus walk on water... and they need a sign, another sign, that he is from God.

So Jesus is wary. We see here that Jesus believes that sign-seeking and miracle-gawking faith is from the shallow end of the faith pool and simply produces more shallow end faith. It is a belief without trust.

So Jesus tells them that rather than seeking food that perishes, they should be seeking the food that endures for an eternity. In other words, their task is not only to believe but to trust in the One whom God has sent.

But, they say, "What sign, Jesus, are you going to give us so that we can believe?" And they cite the story of Moses and the manna, pointing out that, at least, their ancestors were given such a sign with this manna from heaven.

But Jesus wants them on a deeper path and tells them, "The bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

"Give us this bread forever," they say.

"I am the bread of life," Jesus says. "Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

II

You could say that Jesus buys into the theory, "You are what you eat." His theory is not about food but the kinds of things we fill our souls with.

Don't you think it is rather obvious that many, many Americans are hungry for an experience of spiritual depth and meaning? Or maybe it is simply the crushing anxiety which motivates our quest. We see the growth of meditation, yoga, and mindfulness. And a search into unexpected places: from Native American spirit ceremonies to an obsession with angels one year, and the next year Eastern mysticism.

It seems we Americans are hungry, for making sense out of a life that buys and consumes, then buys more and consumes more, that works more, competes more, that schedules more, and achieves more... a life so caught up in the web of hurry and consumption that we

have little time for the things that really matter... such as family, faith, friends, Sabbath, worship, prayer, and community.

We are what we eat... and the stuff we often feed our souls can leave us bloated, but unnourished and still full of anxiety.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus says. “Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” That is soul food.

New York Times columnist Anna Quindlen captured our culture in a commencement address. She said:

“People don’t talk about the soul very much anymore. It is easier to write a resumé than it is to craft a spirit. But a resumé is a cold comfort on a winter night, or when you are sad, or broke, or lonely, or when you’ve gotten back the test results and they are not so good.

So, here’s what I want to tell you. Get a life. A real life, not a manic pursuit of the next promotion, the bigger paycheck, the larger house. Get a life in which you are generous. And realize that life is the best thing ever and that you have no business taking it for granted.

“I am the bread of life,” Jesus says.

We are what we eat. And Jesus is the soul food of our menu.

III

So you have heard me say this before...that we are challenged to think about our faith, not so much as believing in certain doctrines or believing in things about Jesus...but believing in Jesus.

Think about that.

Belief is powerful.

Bill Taylor, in the *Harvard Business Review* writes about Apple CEO Tim Cook.

The story goes back to January 21, 2009, during Cook’s inaugural conference call with investors after (Steve) Jobs announced his medical leave of absence. The very first question was from an analyst who wanted to know whether Cook might replace Jobs permanently and how the company would be different if he did.

Cook did not respond with a detailed review of the *Apple* products. Instead, he offered an impromptu, statement of what he and everyone at *Apple* believed — as if reciting a creed he had learned as a child in Sunday school.

“We believe that we are on the face of the earth to make great products, and that’s not changing,” Cook declared.

“We believe in the simple, not the complex...

We believe in saying no to thousands of products, so that we can really focus on the few that are truly important and meaningful to us,” he added.

“We believe in deep collaboration and cross-pollination of our groups, which allow us to innovate in ways others cannot... And I think that regardless of who is in what job those values are so embedded in this company that *Apple* will do extremely well,” he concluded.

So Taylor concludes his article by saying: “It’s not what you sell; it’s what you believe.” Yes.

Have you ever told someone, “I believe in you”? We are saying we have faith in them, that we know we can depend on them. Right? These are not statements *about* them, but about the *trust* we have *in* them.

So our faith is really about the trust we have in God, whom we see in Jesus.

Do you know what another name for anxiety is? Mistrust. When we are full of anxiety, it means we are missing trust.

“I am the bread of life.”

You are what you eat.