

### ***The Everlasting Feast***

In the name of him who bids us come to his feast, dear friends in Christ: It's said that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. It sounds like something a mother or grandmother would tell a young woman while passing down her heirloom family recipes, the idea being that if she learns to cook well enough, she'll be able to land the man of her dreams. Now, I won't deny that there's an element of truth to it; but quite frankly, I think it's a rather sexist idea. It sells men way too short. It's as if the only thing they ever think about is eating. That's nonsense, of course. Men are far more complex than that. I mean, it's a well-established fact that eating is usually the *second* thing that preoccupies a man's mind.

Beyond that, it isn't just men who enjoy sitting down to a fine meal. It's part of being human. Or, say it another way, it's the way the Lord designed us. So it's no coincidence that he filled the world with all kinds of good things for us to eat: a dazzling variety of fruits and vegetables, grains and legumes, tubers and mushrooms, cheeses and nuts, all kinds of meat, seafood, and poultry – along with a wide array of herbs and spices that can be combined in infinite variation to tickle the taste buds and raise a merely good dish to the level of the sublime. Nor is it a coincidence that all five senses the Lord gave us are at no time so fully engaged as when we're eating. Think about it: well before you actually enjoy the taste of something, you drink deeply of its aroma. There's nothing quite like the smell of a good pot roast filling the house or the heady scent of freshly baked bread. Then there's the visual effect. Again, even before you've eaten anything, a well-prepared meal is a feast for the eyes. And then when finally, you get around to taking a bite, in addition to the taste of something there's the way it feels in your mouth, its relative firmness, texture, and temperature. And then there's the sound of crunching, munching, slurping ... and yes, burping. My point is that the Lord intended eating to be an immensely pleasurable activity that involves the whole of what we are.

As also he intended it to be an occasion for fellowship. You know, it's only been in the last couple of decades that the dinner table stopped being the center of family life for so many of us. For the rest of human history, the two or three daily gatherings around the family dining table were what brought everyone together. Meals were the principal communal activity. They were the time for conversation, sharing stories, teaching children values and family history, for religious devotions, and for building relationships as family and friends assembled at the table to enjoy each other's company as much as they did the food. We were saying something by doing that. We were saying just as we need food to survive so also, we need each other. But these days, what with fast food and conflicting schedules and individual microwavable prepackaged portions, we've really lost something. Oh, we have it now and then on special occasions; but it's something we would do well to recapture in our daily lives, because in God's great wisdom there really is a connection between the stomach and the heart.

We see it in today's Old Testament reading in which the prophet Isaiah gives us a brief glimpse of the joys that await us in the world to come. And how does he describe it? As a lavish feast consisting of the richest, well-trimmed meats and the finest aged wines. And in a culture like theirs that knew firsthand what it meant to go hungry and be constantly threatened by starvation due to famine or drought or plagues of insects or marauding invaders who stole the harvest just when all the hard work was done, the prospect of having an endless feast forever available would seem like paradise indeed. The feast described in the text speaks of

never suffering want and enjoying eternal fellowship and peace. It's perfect fullness for both the stomach and the heart, for both the body and the soul.

And as I considered our eternal home being described as a never-ending feast, it occurred to me how often eating plays a key role in the biblical story line. We see it already at the beginning, when man's first home is a garden designed by God that is stocked full of dozens of varieties of fruit trees. All the delicious food our first parents could ever want was just hanging there for the taking. The only effort required was to reach out their hands and pluck it off. And there were no worms, bugs, bruises, or thorns to ruin any of it.

But it didn't last. And as you know, it was through the act of eating that the fall into sin came about. It happened when Satan tempted our first parents to have an appetite for the one thing the Lord had forbidden. Being complete as humans and having everything they needed was not enough. Now they hungered to be gods in their own right. And by trying to satisfy that craving they lost their place in creation, and creation itself was lost. For Adam's sake the ground was cursed. And the gift of eating that the Lord had meant for our joy and fulfillment became a necessary burden to bear. Hunger, wearisome toil, and futility became man's lot in life. "By the sweat of your brow you shall eat your bread", the Lord told Adam, "until you return to the dust from which you were taken." The Lord was saying, "You'll work until you drop and in the end you'll still be empty." It's a picture, do you see? The Lord was matching the physical plight of man to the spiritual hunger of his soul. In his attempt to eat his way to godhood he began to starve to death. So it is with all of us: sin will never satisfy our true hungers. Oh, it might for a brief moment in the short term, and we keep telling ourselves that it will; but the end of it is always the same: hunger, starvation, and death – the ultimate emptiness: when the body loses the soul.

This theme of eating, for better or for worse, comes to the forefront again several times later in the book of Genesis. We see it especially in the Jacob and Esau narratives. Remember it was Esau who, weakened by his hunger, made a very bad trade: his extremely valuable birthright as the firstborn son for a lowly bowl of red stew. On one hand we see in this story an echo of the fall, when man traded the great birthright that the Lord had given him as the master of a perfect creation in exchange for a bite of fruit. Interestingly though, it is at the same time a picture of the bad trade that Jesus would make for us. On account of his extreme hunger to have us restored to our original place, he agrees to taste the penalty of pain and death our sins deserve. And in exchange we get the birthright and inheritance that belongs to the beloved firstborn Son of God. It's later in the same story that Jacob steals the blessing that belongs to his brother – again, over a meal. While Esau is out hunting down the feast of venison his father has requested, Jacob, disguised as his brother and wearing his clothes sneaks in with a substitute meal of roasted goat, bread, and wine. After eating his fill, his blind old father Isaac makes his last will and testament, giving the blessing to the son he believes to be his beloved firstborn. Once again, it's a picture of how we approach God the Father clothed in the righteousness of Christ given to us in Baptism, and how over a meal that consists of a substitute sacrifice, bread, and wine, we receive the blessing of God that properly belongs to Jesus. In God's great design we who fell through eating the wrong thing are restored to grace through eating the Lord's substitute sacrifice.

The book of Genesis comes to its climax in the stories of Joseph. He too is a profoundly Christ-like character. He's the one who is hated by his brothers, sold for silver, descends to the depths, and is counted by his father as dead. But then, to his brothers' later astonishment, he rises in glory at the right hand of a king and becomes their savior (along with most of the ancient world) through, of all things, providing food for people during a severe famine. Joseph is the

one who provided the bread of life to a world that would otherwise have died of starvation. And let's not forget that he freely forgave his brothers for all the evil they did to him.

Exodus takes up where Genesis leaves off – only it's four hundred years later. God's people who came to Egypt as honored guests have become enslaved. It kind of sounds like the fall all over again, doesn't it? The Lord sees his people's distress and sends them a deliverer in the person of Moses. He brings plagues upon the Pharaoh and his subjects; but the hard-hearted Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go. Then comes the most terrible plague of all: the death of the firstborn. Judgment falls on their Egyptian taskmasters while God's people feast on the very lambs whose blood protects them. Death passes over. It's likely what the Psalmist had in mind when it said, "You have prepared a table for me in the presence of my enemies." And once again, salvation comes to God's people by means of a meal.

Following that, the newly redeemed nation of Israel is sustained every day in the wilderness with the bread that falls from heaven. Each day they are to collect only what they need for that day. The goal is to teach them to trust that the Lord will take care of them the next day too. He tells them this. "I fed you with bread from heaven so that you would learn that it isn't really bread that you live on; but rather it's my Word that sustains you. You live because I say so. Trust me with your lives and I will take care of all your needs." Food and God's Word are made inseparable. And we see this connection throughout the Scripture, like, for example when some of God's prophets were given a scroll upon which the Lord had written the message he wanted them to deliver and they were told to eat the scroll. The idea is that the Word of God would become part of them and that they would embody his message.

But these prophets were merely pictures of the one who really was the Word of God embodied: Jesus Christ. And in him this biblical food theme continues. His first miracle was to create fine well aged wine for a wedding feast. And he made a lot of it. His most widely witnessed miracle was to feed five thousand with a little boy's lunch. Much of his teaching took place at a dinner table. And several of his parables, like the one we heard today, are about a feast of one kind or another.

And then the most important part of his earthly ministry, his passion and death, begins with – you guessed it – a feast. In this case a celebration of the Old Testament Passover. But now Jesus reveals the full reality of what that ancient ritual meal had only foreshadowed. People are delivered from their bondage to sin and death through the death of God's firstborn. And he is at the same time the Lamb of God whose blood protects his people from death, and upon whose flesh they feed. It's the Lord's ultimate plan to get right to his people's hearts by way of their stomachs.

And Jesus too is described as eating and drinking during his passion. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for the cup of the wine of God's wrath to pass from him if possible; but in the end he had to drink it all. And he had to eat his fill too, as we heard in the reading from Isaiah: "He will swallow up on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples ... He will swallow up death forever." That's what's happening on the cross: The Lord of life is consuming the curse of death we deserve. He's internalizing our damnation and drinking the cup of God's wrath so that he can give us the birthright and blessing that belong to him – the birthright and blessing we receive by consuming his body and blood and by internalizing his Word.

Which brings me back to the feast that Isaiah describes for us. And to do this right you have to picture it: a table sagging under the weight of all the perfectly prepared delicacies that are piled up high on it. Imagine the best of Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter dinners all

combined and then some. And all of it is the work of the Master Chef of the universe. The smell of each dish is intoxicating. And the dessert table, oh, you can feel your arteries clogging just looking at it; but it's a good feeling. Go ahead: try to picture it. Now, who's getting hungry? I hope you are because Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." The full feast will come at the end, and we will enjoy it forever together with the entire family of God, all the faithful saints past, present, and yet to come. But for the time being *this* – our gathering together as a family of faith around God's Word and Sacraments – *this* is the feast of victory of our God, a foretaste of the feast to come.

I started this message with an old saying about getting to the heart through the stomach. And we've seen that the Lord does exactly that. I'd like to conclude with a different saying; it's the one that says, "You are what you eat". In a physical sense it's true: the food you eat contains the proteins and other elements your body is made of. And it contains the carbohydrates that power it. It's also true in a spiritual sense: your soul becomes more and more like whatever it is you feed it, and it's powered by the same. The question is: what's your diet consist of? How much of it is the sweet tasting poison of sin's brief pleasures or of mankind's nutrition-less philosophies? How much of it is the trivial tripe on TV, the vanity of fashion and popular personality magazines, or the worst of what the internet has to offer? How much of what you consume could be described as theological junk food?

Let me suggest that we would all do well to work on refining our palate for the really good things that God has to offer. How? By tasting, of course. It's the only way. By hearing more of God's Word, by listening to sermons, by attending Bible studies, by doing more devotional reading, and of course by attending worship, confessing your sins, and receiving Holy Communion. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Eat as much as you like, you won't gain a pound—I promise; but you will be changed to be more like Jesus who is the Word made flesh. And in so doing the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***