



# The New England Church Pulpit

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THE POETRY OF FOOD

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2 Kings 4.42-44

*A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, "Give it to the people and let them eat." But his servant said, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" So Elisha repeated, "Give it to the people and let them eat; for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'" He set it before them; they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the Lord.*

John 6.1-14

*After Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias, a large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."*

An ancient Zen story tells of a man in the jungle running from a fiercely hungry lion. The man climbs a tree to escape only to find the tenacious lion right behind him. The man jumps out of the tree and continues running only to find himself trapped between the lion and a cliff. Spotting a small tree growing out of the side of the cliff, he leaps over the side onto the flimsy tree as it bends and cracks. The lion circles around, positioning himself at the bottom of the cliff waiting for the inevitable fall. Just as the limb that the man is hanging on to begins to break, he spots a beautiful, ripe red strawberry growing on the cliff's edge. He reaches out, picks it and eats it; it is sweet, and juicy and so refreshing.

As Jesus was pursued by crowds that were as persistent as a hungry lion, he capitalized on the value of a well-ordered, if serendipitous, picnic on the lush grassy knoll, a sweet strawberry, as it were, to be savored amid the clamor of life's hectic pace. A couple of dried anchovies and a handful of soda crackers were enough for a feast in the abundance of a holy presence, easing the angst of the precarious limb on which human existence hangs from day to day. It is a lesson in living mindfully, in trusting the joys of simple pleasures, in the transformative communion of body, soul and spirit around the common act of eating together.

Food has become a perfunctory necessity in our modern culture, utilitarian in the extreme to feed and overfeed our bodies so we can keep running from the lions of busy schedules and hectic activities that relentlessly pursue us. We grab a quick bite at a drive-through window, choke down a burger and fries with one hand while we're driving with the other; or we snarf down a sandwich while texting our next appointment with the other hand to let them know we'll be late and somehow manage in all of this to jot down a few notes from the last appointment before we forget what that was about. Where is the transformative, calming, nourishing power of food in this picture?

Food is a divine source of enchantment; it is poetry for the body and soul. It is the threshold into that calm center of life that connects us to things holy. It uniquely binds spirit and body with one delicious strawberry in a way that no other activity can. Yet can we expect food to be transformative when we don't even give a kitchen table the chance to do what it was intended to do? The very act of setting the table asks the soul to be present as we transform eating into dining. Eating and driving, eating and texting should be outlawed as surely as driving and texting.

"Food is an implement of magic," says psychologist and theologian Thomas Moore. And only the most coldhearted rationalist could squeeze the juices of life out of it and make it bland. He goes on to say that "in a true sense, a cookbook is the best source of psychological advice," the kitchen/dining room/backyard patio/or grill being the first choice of a room for therapy.

Poet Ogden Nash, in his inimitable style, dotes on the poetry of food in this little ditty:

Some singers sing of ladies' eyes,  
And some of ladies lips.  
Refined ones praise their ladylike ways  
And course ones [sing of] their hips.... (hymn)  
Yet I, though custom call me crude,  
Prefer to sing in praise of food.  
Food  
Yes, food  
Just any old kind of food.  
Pheasant is pleasant, of course,  
And terrapin, too, is tasty.  
Lobster I freely endorse,  
In pate or patty or pasty.  
But there's nothing the matter with butter,  
And nothing the matter with jam.  
And the warmest greetings I utter  
To the ham and the yam and the clam.  
For they're food.  
All food.

And I think very fondly of food.  
Though I'm broody at times  
When bothered by rhymes  
I brood  
On food.

We've relegated food consumption to how many calories it contains, how much salt and how many grams of saturated fat. We worry over diet foods, fast foods, fat foods and processed food. All of these are important, of course, to a point, but all too often these become the sole measurement of food at the expense of the beauty and poetry of food which comes from savoring, sharing, and luxuriating in the textures and aromas and spices of the wide variety available to us. If we always eat on the run, the soul in food will vanish, and we will have lost one more important source of enchantment in everyday experience.

The soul is not a mechanical problem that needs to be solved; it's a living being that has to be fed. It is too easy to be trapped between the busy schedules that pursue us like lions and the dangerous cliffs that seem like the end of the road while overlooking the delicious strawberries of our daily meals. Food is more than just fuel to keep our physical beings going so we can do more things and achieve more goals. It is poetry and respite for the soul.

That is why, I think, we come to communion month after month throughout the year to remind ourselves to take time to notice and savor the strawberries that grow on the cliff as we hang on for dear life to the breaking branches. There is nothing more magical about this meal than one of pizza and beer or biscuits and gravy. Communion is rather a place to rehearse the importance of eating with intention, of eating to enjoy, of eating with friends and family, of eating to connect with all that is holy in life, so that we will remember to do it at each time we eat. For every meal is communion.

Give us this day our daily bread, our blackberry pie, our ice cream, our blackberry pie with ice cream. Our favorite comfort food, a picnic in the park on an ordinary workday, an old table set with bent and stained knives and forks, a glass of wine or a cold beer on a hot summer's day, a hot dog at a Cubs or a Sox game, a festive dinner at a swank restaurant—all these, in moderation, please the soul immeasurably. Every repast is full of soul and enchantment; it asks only for a small degree of mindfulness and a habit of eating with care and imagination. And in this daily communion with God, there is an abundance of joy and peace in every morsel.

And if you're still wondering why the guy who was hanging on to that breaking limb for dear life spent his time savoring that juicy, sweet strawberry instead of worrying about the ferocious lion beneath, you've missed the whole point of Jesus's story. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann