



Food that Endures
Exodus 16:2-4, 9-15; John 6:24-35
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (August 1, 2021)

1. Need a snack?

- I. We have aplenty. So much good stuff so little time.
 - a. Abundance can be a distraction: as our fridge and our mouth are stuffed, we think less of God.
 - b. Too much of eating food has been reduced to mechanical process, fast, and cheap. Have we sacrificed quality for quantity? How is our food production impacting life? What are our values in the process of making and consuming food?
 - c. Take Nutella for example. Nutella has been in the news not only for its nutritional value (or lack of): One serving of Nutella contains 200 calories, 21 grams of sugar and 11g of fat. The nutritional aspect is to be considered especially if it is promoted as a healthy food.
 - d. But there are serious ethical questions that Nutella (and other food companies that use palm oil) needs to address. Kids as young as ten are forced to work grueling 12-hour shifts to harvest palm oil in Indonesia and Malaysia. Exhaustion, injuries, heavy loads, and worst of all, rape and trafficking.



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- e. Additional injury comes to the environment: huge swathes of magnificent rainforest are destroyed to make way for the palm oil plantations. Whole ecosystems are upset.¹
- f. Given all this, what's the real cost of food? What are we willing to pay?

2. God provides in the desert...abundantly...with a caveat.

I. A crisis in the wilderness.

- a. God's patience at people's grumbling: have they forgotten the miracles and what life was like in Egypt? God treats them gently, like the spiritual infants they are. He gives them time to grow up. Faith is in its infancy. "The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. ... And count the patience of our Lord as salvation" (2 Peter 3:9, 15a).
- b. When we think of Moses, we imagine a strong leader capable of facing Pharaoh's army. Here, he resembles a beleaguered nanny

¹ [Child labor in palm oil industry tied to Girl Scout cookies \(apnews.com\); Major Brands and Banks Failing to Stop Deforestation and Human Rights Abuses, New Scorecard Finds - Rainforest Action Network](#)



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contracted by God to watch over, lead, and form an unruly, often obstinate populace into living freely as God's own people.

- II. Survival and irrational instinct at work. When we feel threatened, our anxiety goes up and we act irrationally. Under threat, we have a fight, flight, or freeze reaction. We look for someone to blame and we reverse our fear outward onto others. Does God care? Has Moses brought them there to watch them die? People have quickly forgotten the innumerable interventions of God on their behalf and all the benefits of following God's guidance through Moses.

God intervenes again and gives them manna. "It would not be a gross exaggeration to say that the Bible is a culinary manual, concerned from start to finish about how to eat, what to eat, when to eat."²

- a. The people's immediate unenthusiastic reaction: The Israelites quite naturally asked, "What is it?" or, in their language, "Man hu?" an expression which evolved into the name manna. God's continuing benevolence led the people of Israel to the conviction that their

² Lauren Winner, *Wearing God*, p. 92



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God would always provide for them. Memory transformed the unfamiliar bread into the never-to-be-forgotten manna, a sign of God's enduring love. This initial experience has eventually transformed into mature faith: "You, eternal Trinity, are Table and Food and Waiter for us." (Catherine of Siena)

- b. There is a caveat: the gathering of the bread needs to happen "daily." People need to learn to live in the present moment and to trust that God is as generous tomorrow as God is today: no need to hoard! God is faithful and constant. God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

3. God provides what we need: life eternal.

- I. Last week, we heard that a child surrendered his lunch and through Jesus' blessing, thousands of hungry people ate their fill. Today, Jesus encourages the crowd to seek "the food that endures for eternal life".
 - a. When Jesus offered "true bread," they responded, "Give us this bread always." His answer, "I am the living bread," was not what they were looking for. Instead of promising a



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free lunch, Jesus was inviting them to be nourished by his life, to assume his way of being as the path that would bring them everything they could ever want.

- b. If Jesus is the “bread of life,” what kind of bread is he? What kind of life is he offering when he offers himself? How filled do you fill when you have him?
- c. When one child gave all he had, they saw that those who share everything will never hunger. If they wanted to do the works of God, if they wanted the food that endures, they needed only to believe in Jesus enough to do what he did. “To believe” is not an invitation to have a set of dogmas to go by. It is total confidence in the approachability and responsiveness of God. It is an active verb that shows one’s character and ethical living. “Take delight in the Lord and God will give you the desires of your heart.” (Ps. 37:4)
- d. Jesus is the bread of life and life itself. Not even our lives, which most of us love and enjoy, are complete in themselves. “My life,” writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “is outside myself,



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beyond my disposal. My life is another, a stranger; Jesus Christ.” This reflects the apostle Paul’s confident insight: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ living in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me.” (Gal. 2:20)

- e. The people are quick to suggest a transactional availability. It’s all about profitability, whatever makes their life easy: “What must we do to perform the works of God?” The people show total lack of faith in their attempt at bargaining with God. They still haven’t grasped what is truly important and life-giving. He is ready to offer what they need but they have their own unspoken list of needs and want to know how they can get on God’s good side.
- f. Jesus does not give work instructions but rather faith instructions: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (v. 29). Trust in Jesus, the one who has come down from heaven, is the work of God



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for the believer. To borrow an AA slogan: it works if you work it!

- II. What's the daily bread you need?
 - a. The question is not: "What am I going to do?" but "Who am I going to *be*?" What type of person am I going to be in the world? Has my relationship with Jesus brought my faith into maturity? How am I going to be an instrument of God's transformative love to the world? Have I surrendered it all to Jesus?
 - b. What do I need to grow in trust? Often, it's not a matter of "Do I have what it takes to make a difference?" but "Do I trust Jesus enough to be available and present and let him work through me?"
 - c. Somebody else might have what the world needs (like the child presenting his lunch to the disciples,) but am I part of the team distributing God's blessings to a hungry world?
 - d. There is a "plural" in the equation: it's hardly ever just "me." Even Jesus' miracles to individuals are meant for a collective group: it's always about creating community; there is



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always a “we” and an “us.” The pronouns in the only prayer Jesus taught, the Our Father, are plural: there is always communal benefit and collective salvation in God’s mind.

- e. In the Hebrew Scriptures, God saves the people and never an isolated individual. In the Christian Scripture, the challenge is to trust we are part of the On Body of Christ. The growing edge for the Church in the USA is to make the leap from an individualistic faith to a communal and interdependent reality: I am blessed when we are.

III. Let’s look at the world: Who needs Jesus?

- a. Birth rates decrease with the increase of education and prosperity: a satisfied belly may translate into a satisfied heart. Wealth may be a detraction if we do not pay attention. Do not let the abundance (of food, of entertainment) become a distraction from the central calling to seek God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind, all our strength. Living outside poverty is a wonderful thing in many ways, but as Jesus pointed out so often, it leaves one open to the temptation of a



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divided heart. So, he urgently invites us to live in simplicity and to seek the kingdom of God first and foremost.

- b. Implications of fertility decline for religious life and practice: history professor, Philip Jenkins, writes: “[A] direct relationship exists between the fertility rates of a community...and that society’s degree of religious fervor and commitment. High fertility societies, like most of contemporary Africa, tend to be fervent, devout, and religiously enthusiastic. Conversely, the lower the fertility rate, and the smaller the family size, the greater the tendency to detach from organized or institutional religion. Fertility rates provide an effective gauge for religious behavior and commitment, and rapid changes should serve as an alarming bell about incipient secularization and the decline of institutional religion.” This phenomenon is not limited to Christianity. “So,” the author asks, “will a fertility bust destroy religion? No, or not exactly...[T]he fall of religious institutions does not necessarily destroy faith as such, or



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eliminate spiritual hunger. Witness the upsurge of pilgrimage across supposedly secular Europe.”³

- c. In this scenario and covid on top of it, how is the Church going to “be” Bread for the world? Implication for “older” churches: Look around, what needs to be done?
 1. In June, Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park, on the South Side of Chicago, installed a community fridge just outside its front doors. Anyone can leave food in the fridge or take food from it. Local restaurants, stores, and residents donate meals and fresh produce, and volunteers help keep the fridge clean.
 2. Some other churches and grass-root organizations have put up free produce stands and expanded services from soup kitchens.
 3. Nativity outreach
 - a. Food Pantry
 - b. Migrant Workers’ Children’s Shoes

³ Philip Jenkins, *Fertility and Faith: The Demographic Revolution and the Trans-formation of World Religions*.



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c. Weekend Blessings

d. How about:

- i. After-school mentoring?
- ii. Year around school supplies?
- iii. College youth food pantry?

4. Collaboration with migrant congregations and institutions

IV. Ora et Labora: work and prayer must go together. My prayer must be a reflection of my relationship with God to be a real prayer. It speaks of my identity and produces ethical social involvement without that involvement my prayer is empty words. If my actions are not based on prayer, if they are not born out of an intimate dialogue with God, then they are only my futile attempts at solving the world problems. Nativity is a church active in love steeped in prayer. We find our identity in our conversation with God.

4. conclusion