

Food Epiphanies in the Midst of Abundance

Reflection on Isaiah 60:1-6

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Trinity United, Ottawa

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The Older Testament text from Isaiah for this Feast of the Epiphany, is a vision Matthew adopted into his birth story for baby Jesus, to show him as the new Light of Israel. We hear the ancient prophet's shining promise of abundance and wealth for Israel, as she takes her place as the Light of the Nations. God's people shine as spiritual beacons, drawing their own offspring back home and leading wise ones from afar to their Light. The foreigners who see and seek to share in the Light of Israel's God, travel great distances on camel's back, bringing gifts of gold and frankincense. All the bounty of the sea and the wealth of nations pour out on radiant Israel. What a glorious, bright vision for mid-winter! No wonder Matthew wanted his Magi to bring gifts of gold and frankincense to baby Jesus, evoking in Jewish minds this vision of hope, reunion and affluence.

Reading of Isaiah 60:1-6

*“You shall see and be radiant, your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
and the wealth of the nations shall come to you.”*

Did the season of Jesus' birth-day bring you some experience of God's grace-filled presence as reunion and plenty? Maybe there weren't gifts of gold or frankincense under your tree, but perhaps you got some of that promised abundance at Christmas dinner?!

Christmas dinner is such a succulent image of abundance, even living as we now do, amidst daily affluence. But perhaps we are too accustomed to abundance, no longer hallowing and appreciating God's gifts of food, from sea and land? And perhaps, even though we 'have it all,' we still need practise in trusting the grace of God's abundance? We who live amidst wealth and plenty so often eat unmindfully or in

excess, suffering as a consequence the Western spiritual diseases of ‘affluenza.’

January seems to be the season for reconsidering our food habits and addictions. Tis the season of broken resolutions. And this new CBC TV series “Village on a Diet”.

There is more than enough food for all to share, yet many of us, goaded by consumerism, seeking elusive pleasure and unconsciously fearing scarcity, still hoard food, in our pantries or in our bodies. Aware of it or not, - we choose foods that do not help us to shine with the light of good health. This is the spiritual dark side of our feasting...when it continues day to day.

Mark preached last Sunday about right relationship with the animals we consume as food. Right for them and for our own health. Today, we celebrate what used to be known as the Feast of the Epiphany, sharing our sacred Communion meal - with a healthy, communal meal to follow. Today, perhaps we can eat with a New Year’s consciousness of God’s abundant Grace?

I don’t know about you, but I’ve been uncomfortable in my own Christmastime food excesses, so I’m on uneasy ground in this reflection on food spirituality. I know that feasting - such harmless fun for a while at Christmas - can become a lifestyle symptom of spiritual dis-ease. Our culture encourages a wide spectrum of food-related physical, emotional and spiritual distresses, diseases and disorders that can do us a lot more harm than a little hunger. From diabetes, cancer and heart disease, to low self-esteem, anorexia and bulimia, we who never need to pray literally for ‘our daily bread’, suffer nevertheless with so many ‘food issues.’

When our relationship with food is less than wise, conscious and holy, we can’t shine with the light of good health or ‘embody’ Godly love for our self, and for all to see. We exhibit instead, our denial of God’s abundant love, by trying to stuff our inner spiritual emptiness with food. So, for all of us who in recent weeks have suffered from or struggled with an abundance of food and our unhealthy food choices, I’ll refer to “Women, Food and God: An Unexpected Path to Almost

Everything,” by Geneen Roth. (This is not exclusive to women, by the way.)

“Food - as matter turned to spirit [in our body-being] - is the direct connection between the physical and the spiritual, between what we put in our mouths and what we feel in our hearts. Passion, strength and [light] cannot take root in exhausted, burdened bodies.”

When Jesus said, ‘It’s not what you put in your mouth, but what comes out of it’, he was dismissing ritual purity food laws that exacerbated hunger among the poor. He wasn’t facing down a bowl of potato chips and a rum and eggnog. What we eat does effect our ability to shine with God light. We are what we eat....molecule by molecule...for better and for worse...We are Spirit embodied for a lifetime in transformed foodstuffs. Sometimes, we get overembodied or overwhelmed by the very food Creation gives to build us up.

I’m not just talking about how ‘fat’ we are. Dieting, the author Roth makes clear, is just another Western food disease. Self deprivation and self-criticism only feed the food sins of affluenza. Instead, she proposes a self aware approach of understanding why we relate to food the ways we do, and healing the root causes with consciousness and nutrition. Her workshops “use eating as a doorway to freedom from suffering, the demystification of weight loss, and the luminous presence that so many call God.”

She writes: “The only definition of God that makes sense, is one that uses this human life and its suffering as a path to the heart of love itself. Which is why our relationship with food is a perfect doorway...a direct path to coming home after a lifetime of being exiled.”

Food spirituality, relating daily to food as a path to spiritual growth, is not a new thing. Think of the fasting practises of all religions. As a child, I had to fast from all food and drink for three hours before Communion. Imagine how special that taste of bread and grape was then! Have you ever tried a health fast or cleanse, and

experienced that wonderful freedom of body and soul? It's so liberating when the food is no longer in control! Try breaking your bondage to food. Religion has always advocated some fasting. Because it is so freeing! Remember Jesus in the desert. He resisted the temptation and knew his strength. So can we. Because God's grace is so much more sustaining than even chocolate.

The question I struggle to reframe for myself perennially - because I do struggle with my food issues - is how can I use the abundant gifts of food that God sends in my direction in a healthy, healing way? I've followed the research in natural nutrition for decades, so it's not knowledge that I lack. But many do lack up-to-date knowledge about nutrition, since our mainstream food culture and its advertising are downright toxic, and mainstream medicine is sadly unaware in areas like nutrition for cancer prevention and cure. I refer anyone interested in learning about that to "Anti-Cancer: A New Way of Life" by David Servan-Schreiber, MD, PhD. This doctor's second round of brain cancer got him on a path to the foods that make our bodies an inhospitable place for cancer cells to grow.

There are lots of good reasons that we eat ourselves into poor health. Like most folks, what I eat and when and how much has to do with a lot of other things than nutrition or even pleasure. We eat according to our family's patterns. In my big family of origin, with limited means, anything that was good was rationed. So I'm still grabbing for more treats - though they send my blood sugar soaring and plummeting.

We eat in community. In communion. What would church be like without bread and grape, without squares and cookies and pie? Ask a diabetic! We eat to compensate for childhood trauma or deprivation or poor self esteem - all these are symptoms that we haven't taken into our beings enough of God's healing love. Our food issues are spiritual as well as physical, like any other addictive behaviour. So God's love will offer us a spiritual path out of our food affluenza and addictions. Some people follow the twelve steps of Overeaters Anonymous to let God fill them up - instead of the wrong foods.

Let's take up the practise of really saying 'Grace' and meaning it. Putting God first, before the food. This month's food spirituality theme at Trinity is an invitation to learn more about how your eating habits relate to and reveal your relationship with yourself and God and others. To make your relationship with food more holy and healthy. Our events are a chance to learn about how we can change our relationship with food and our relationship with God at the same time. And how we can support each other as an eating community too. To eat healthy. To eat holy. To eat our daily bread in thankfulness for affluence and in trust of God's abundance - so that we truly shine with God Light, in the midst of our good life.

Amen!

