

## What Would Jesus Eat? (Gary)

Next time you're browsing through the fridge searching for a snack, or waiting for your entree at your favorite restaurant, here's something you might ponder: how many of the stories and parables of the New Testament deal with food? You can hardly turn a page without encountering some culinary event.

Food and spirituality aren't normally associated in most people's mental file drawers. If we think about them at all, we tend to put them in different categories, like ketchup and Kierkegaard, Aquinas and asparagus. One category concerns the life of the mind and spirit, the other is what's for dinner. Matters of faith revolve around intangibles, at least that's what many of us learned in Sunday School. But that's not the religion presented in the Bible.

There eating, drinking and dining are very close to the heart of the gospel. Consider some examples:

Feeding the five thousand (the tale of the loaves and the fishes), a story that's repeated and retold more than once. Turning water into wine (the wedding feast at Cana). Killing the fatted calf (the parable of the Prodigal Son). Jesus selects his chief disciples including Peter from among fisherman at the docks, and when their nets are empty, he instructs them to try again and the nets come up with a full catch. He directs listeners how to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread," and in the same sermon promises "Blessed are you that hunger now, for you will be satisfied." Explaining why neither he nor his followers follow the laws that require fasting, he talks about new wine and wineskins. When his disciples are famished, he allows them to pluck and eat grain on the Sabbath. He talks about the kingdom of heaven being like leaven in a loaf of bread, or like a man who once gave a great banquet for his neighbors. Jesus drinks water from a well with a woman of Samaria. "I was hungry and you gave me food," he says, "I was thirsty and you gave me drink." He tells stories about seeds and vineyards and sowers and coming harvests.

The last supper he shared with his disciples might or might not have been a Jewish seder dinner, but sharing a meal with fermented beverages would become the central sacrament for the new movement called Christianity that gathered around the rabbi's memory. And from all of this, you might imagine that Jesus was either obsessed with food or simply a guy who liked to eat. You might suppose that "Rub-a-dub-dub, thanks for the grub" really *is* the Lord's Prayer. And of course, you would be mistaken.

Because Jesus was also the one who said "man does not live by bread alone," who advised his companions not to be anxious, asking "what shall we eat?" or "what shall we drink?" At times he seems almost oblivious to diet, suggesting that it's not what one puts into one's mouth that matters so much as what comes out.

To understand the seeming contradictions, you almost need a social history of food in first century Palestine. You need to know that food and drink are much more than means of bodily sustenance, but also markers of class and caste. In Christ's time, the dietary laws practiced by observant Jews were a means of separating holy people from

the ungodly, the pure from the impure. The issue of what one ate and with whom were means of establishing and maintaining a strict spiritual hierarchy, or what anthropologists call “commensality,” from the Latin root *mensa*, which means “table.” Who sits at the head of the table and who at the foot, who gets served first or last, who waits and who’s waited on and who gets the scraps are customs well-established in every human society and that reflect the prevailing pecking order of power, from Jesus’ day to our own. And the core of Jesus’ ministry lay in challenging not only the hierarchy of his own time—eating and drinking with wine bibbers and sinners—but in challenging all pecking orders, which is why he was labeled a glutton and drunkard by his contemporaries, and why the issue of commensality remains pertinent today, long after the distinctions between Jew and Gentile, kosher and non-kosher have lost their meaning for most of us.

Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan invites us to imagine a beggar coming to our door, asking for something to eat. Maybe we could think of a scruffy figure carrying a bedroll and backpack, holding a sign by the roadside, “Will work for food.” Now (Crossan suggests) think of “the difference between giving them some food to go, of inviting them into your kitchen for a meal, of bringing them into the dining room to eat in the evening with your family, or of having them come back on Saturday night for supper with a group of your friends. Think, again, if you were a large company’s CEO, of the difference between a cocktail party in the office for all the employees, a restaurant lunch for all the middle managers, or a private dinner party for your vice presidents in your own home.” Consider the difference between filling a grocery bag for JUMP and receiving a grocery bag from JUMP, between cooking and serving dinner at the Salvation Army or eating there or at the Food Shelf. Now as two thousand years ago, rules of commensality separate the haves from the have-nots, winners from losers, the privileged from the disenfranchised.

And I think that’s why Jesus said it’s not enough to feed the poor. You have to become poor yourself, at least in spirit, in sympathy, in imagination, to close the gap. Otherwise you remain estranged, distanced, removed not only from your neighbor but ultimately from the source of human contact, care and community, estranged finally from the source of life itself.

Getting back into right relation with all of that has to start somewhere, and it could just as well start with food. Other spiritual traditions suggest that one might focus on the breath, or on a walking meditation, or on the repetition of a mantra. But mindfulness could begin equally well by concentrating on how and what we eat—ingestion being a simple act that necessarily happens many times each day, but that like breathing often takes place without much deliberate thinking or awareness.

How often have you come to the end of meal without really having tasted or paid attention to what you were munching on? Have you ever nibbled on snacks or gulped down a drink with your mind entirely elsewhere and preoccupied?

Conscious eating would mean realizing that food is about relationships: relationships with the earth and sun, with plants and animals and water and soil, with the farmers and laborers who tend the land and bring the crops to market. It’s about the Mexicans and

Jamaicans who milk the cows and pick the apples here in Vermont. It's about rain forests felled and burned to graze cattle for fast food chains and about the folks who work in the slaughterhouses. Eating is close to the central mystery of existence, the beautiful and tragic truth that some perish so that others can live and flourish. But food is also where nature and culture meet, and the question of who lives and who dies is as much a more determination as one of being part of a biological food chain.

Conscious eating would mean asking why in a land where food has never been so plentiful some stuff themselves to excess while others go without and why so many seem still empty, regardless of how many calories they consume. Asking "what would Jesus eat?" would mean reflecting on what a compassionate and responsible diet might be, taking time not just to enjoy each mouthful, but to savor the taste of interconnection in each and every bite.

Eating in the Kingdom doesn't mean following strict rules—all steamed tofu and never a deep-fried twinkie—at least not if we can believe the gospels. Rather it means confronting rules and institutions that keep us in unhealthy relationships with our bodies, our environment and each other. Good eating recognizes the truth of the Hebrew proverb, "Better a dry crust with peace than a house full of feasting with strife." (Proverbs 17:1) Peace-making, justice-making, and caring for creation can all begin with what's on our plates. Green politics and green beans, activism and applesauce, food for the body and food for the spirit really do belong on the same menu, after all. Because you'll never get closer to a taste of heaven than with freshly picked, garden grown tomato. Bon appetit!