

What's for Supper?

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

August 20, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Proverbs 9:1-6; Ephesians 5:15-20; John 6:51-58

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I believe my last words to Matthew were, “Go and get yourself something to eat for supper. . .” It was the annual elementary school May Fair. I was busy watching our younger daughter, who was trying games at various booths to win prizes. Within the hour I’d be volunteering at one of those booths myself. I figured Matthew was old enough to wander around the May Fair on his own. I gave him a stack of tickets and some cash, and suggested he find something to eat for supper—since it was about the time we normally would eat at home.

When we reconnected following my volunteer stint, I asked Matthew what he’d eaten. The tickets and cash were no more—they went toward French fries, two sodas, a Nerds Rope (for the uninitiated, that’s a candy—a chewy rope with little rock candies called “Nerds” stuck to it), and the big lollipop presently residing in his mouth (which happened to be lollipop #4).

Why should I have been surprised? Did I think for one minute he would diligently seek out the four basic food groups, making certain everything was trans-fat free and fiber-rich? Did I suppose because Matthew is more than willing to eat steamed broccoli and baked fish when I prepare it (in fact, that’s what we had last night for supper), that he would somehow not succumb to the temptation of the food booths at the May Fair? I’d have been a fool to think he wouldn’t choose the junk food over something of substance and sustenance this one particular evening. That’s the way we are. And, I guess, for one solitary evening, making a supper of a Nerds Rope and soda won’t kill you. I just wouldn’t want Matthew to make a habit of it. A steady diet of junk food, and its virtual absence of nutrition, can pose all kinds of health risks.

Since July 30, our Gospel lessons have taken us through a long discourse where Jesus repeatedly declares the nourishment he alone can provide—because he states it is nourishment from God himself. Jesus will reiterate in today’s Gospel the following: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven . . .” Jesus declares he is not junk food, but rather, the very One who can sustain a person through life—through this earthly life of ours, and into the life to come. Except his declarations get questioned every step of the way by those listening to him. It isn’t that the people don’t want to be fed and nourished. They know they’re hungry. They just don’t realize what they’re hungry for. In their hunger, they could be tempted to go after the wrong thing to fill them up. And they can’t understand how **Jesus** can possibly feed them, how his flesh can offer life. See, Jesus is busy teaching them about a life where they would receive him and feed on him, and he then would abide in them, and they are so skeptical and offended and confused by those words. The writer Paul Stroble compared his listeners to children being served something for supper they don’t recognize. They immediately screw up their faces and say, “What **is** this?”

Well, OK, *what is this that Jesus is offering us?* On one level, we could hear Jesus' words and understand them as a rather involved and theologically-rich discussion our Gospel writer has pulled together about the meal of Holy Communion. And that's a pretty fair estimation of this lesson. We Lutherans, from Martin Luther on down the line of generations these past 500 years have confessed that in the mystery of the meal of Holy Communion—the supper of our Lord—Jesus Christ is somehow really present for us in, with and under this meal. Yes, there are distinctions—subtle and not-so-subtle—in theological understanding among various denominations, but we Lutherans proclaim that in a little while we feast on Jesus, his life offered for us, as we eat and drink the bread and wine.

Yet I wouldn't want to limit Jesus' words to a discussion solely on the sacrament of Holy Communion. His words about our receiving him and having him abide in us, and us in him, do take us to this sacrament—but also point us beyond it.

If indeed Jesus promises to give us his own life and abide in us, as he says he will, then Jesus is talking about the possibility of our having a relationship with him that is deeper than any relationship we presently have, or can have, in our lives. Deeper than our relationships with our loved ones in our family, or even our best friends. Because he dwells in us. But such a relationship as that needs nurturing.

We already know how our relationships with family and friends can suffer when we're not together or connected or paying attention to one another. When we neglect those relationships, their fragile quality soon becomes apparent. Spend more time chatting in a chat room than chatting with your spouse, and your marriage is bound to suffer. Get so over-scheduled that each member of the household continually goes separate ways throughout the week, and missed will be precious opportunities for sharing and talking and helping one another. Let too much time elapse between regular coffee breaks with a good friend, and you will soon find yourself shrugging your shoulders and saying about your friend, "We just drifted apart."

The same thing can happen in our relationship with Jesus Christ. He desires to enter our lives, filling it with his love and power. But how can that occur when our time in his presence is limited?

Do you realize that you can be on the active membership roll of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America as long as you have communed and given of record at least once in the last two years? That's what the ELCA constitution allows. Now, that's really an administrative issue, and I guess I'm preaching to the choir, as they say, because so many of you worship so regularly here. But consider the folks who worship infrequently at best, whose worship pattern manages to keep them on the rolls, but not much more. Consider what kind of nutrition we get when that's what our communal worship is like. If that's all we did—come to worship a few times a year—that's the spiritual equivalent of eating a Nerds Rope and French fries 99 % of the time, and only rarely consuming steamed broccoli and baked fish. A worship service here or there is perhaps enough to fill our belly for a day or two, but we need more of Jesus to sustain us for the long haul.

And oh, how I know we lead busy, over-scheduled lives, and worship attendance is, at times, difficult and challenging to bring into the mix. We've tried to help here at Trinity by offering several different services, giving opportunities to come into God's presence regularly. So wouldn't it be tragic for our Lord

to look at us, consider our relationship with him, then shrug his shoulders and sadly say, “We simply drifted apart”?

I can speak as a writer of sermons on this issue. I like my vacation as much as the next person, and I’m grateful when I get a break from the work of preparing a sermon. But I find that, when I don’t preach for a couple weeks, when I’m not immersed in the scripture for a particular Sunday, when I’m not spending time in theological reflection, then I really struggle with my **next** sermon. But when I’m immersed in the scripture, and when I’m involved in the rhythm of regular worship, study, sermon preparation, and theological conversation and faith-sharing with my colleagues and parishioners, I feel as if I’m carried along by all these things, and most especially carried along by Jesus himself and his Holy Spirit, and I believe that I write and preach better sermons because of that.

So, wouldn’t that regular immersion in worship and theological reflection and Christian fellowship do the same for you? When you regularly gather in his name, feed on his words, and receive his gifts, when you spend time talking with other members of the body of Christ—and not just talking about the weather and how Joe Pa’s team will be this year, but talking about things that truly matter, the things that are informed and impacted by your faith—then you are allowing Jesus Christ so to intermingle with your life and be such a constant presence in it that his life begins to infuse yours with all his vitality, his teachings begin to guide your actions and words, and his Spirit moves you to respond to the world with his compassion and mercy. Well, that kind of immersion in the Christian community, in worship, study and prayer is the nutrition you and I need on a regular, consistent basis, and it makes possible an ever-deepening relationship with the One who chooses to dwell among us and abide in us forever.

Please don’t go for the Nerds Rope and French fries! Yearn instead for the real food from heaven which Christ generously lavishes on us every time we gather to listen to him. I assure you that when your relationship with him is nurtured thusly, you’ll find your entire perspective on life, the world, and the people around you will be changed. For it will be based on the foundation of this God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son to die for us—not to condemn us but to save us—so that believing in him, we might, at last, truly live.

AMEN.