"Food for the Soul"
A Sermon Delivered by Rev. John Balicki
Third Sunday of Easter
April 14, 2024
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine.

When the waitress asked if I wanted my pizza cut into four or eight slices, I said, 'Four. I don't think I can eat eight.'
— Yogi Berra

Seize the moment. Remember all those women on the Titanic who waved off the dessert cart.
— Erma Bombeck

"The gentle art of gastronomy is a friendly one. It hurdles the language barrier, makes friends among civilized people, and warms the heart."
— Samuel Chamberlain

Welcome to the Third Sunday of Easter, the food Sunday of our eight Sundays of the Easter season. In our collect we prayed, "O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread". There is something about sharing food that makes us more known, more intimate to each other. Unless we are wicked lonesome or we just love to cook, we tend not to invite just anyone to our house to eat with us; it's someone we already know well or someone we want to know better. Each of the gospels for the Third Sunday of Easter picks up on this theme. Last year we had the Emmaus gospel. Remember the painting of "The Kitchen Maid" by Diego Velazquez? The risen Jesus encounters two disciples on the road between Jerusalem and a small village and he shares the meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures, but it is only when they stop at an inn and break bread together that they realize who he is. Next year we'll hear how the risen Jesus is on a beach waiting for the disciples to come ashore from a night of fishing and he's there cooking them breakfast. They share bread and fish and know it is the risen Lord. After the meal, Jesus has a conversation with Peter and asks him three times if he loves him, to make up for the three times he denied him. A level of reconciliation and intimacy is achieved because of the meal that preceded it. And this year, Luke tells us how the risen Jesus appears to the disciples in the upper room and they are afraid. Debie Thomas describes what happens next:

> *to allay their fears, Jesus offers his friends the tactile testimony of his body: "Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." Luke doesn't tell us whether the disciples take Jesus up on his offer. I imagine the braver ones do — extending a trembling*

finger to poke Jesus's skin, or leaning in to peer more closely at his scarred feet — while the more spooked and timid ones hold back.

When hands and feet prove inadequate to convince the disciples of Jesus's physical presence, he offers up his tongue, teeth, esophagus, stomach, and intestines, too: "Have you anything to eat?" The disciples hand him a piece of broiled fish, and he takes and eats it in their presence. A simple act, but an act that shifts the story. As Jesus chews and swallows, something becomes possible that was impossible before. The disciples lose enough of their fear to draw close and actually listen to what he's saying, and their receptivity allows Jesus to "open their minds to understand." By the end of the encounter, they are no longer frightened human beings; they are "witnesses of these things," emboldened for life and ministry. Simply by expressing physical hunger and accepting bodily nourishment, Jesus turns trauma into communion.

And with a piece of broiled fish, how odd. Perhaps we only eat broiled fish because our medical care provider has told us to reduce our cholesterol. But for Palestinian fishermen it was a readily accessible food. Perhaps it was food Jesus ate with his disciples many a time. For the disciples it seemed to do the trick. This combination of eating with Jesus and then hearing him explain the scriptures transformed them from being amazed and terrified to being his witnesses to the point of giving their lives. That's the Easter transformation. We've been doing it ever since although we reverse the order, doing the scriptures first and then the sharing of the bread and cup. This binds us to Jesus and to each other as it did those early disciples right after the resurrection.

But we are human beings and we hunger not only for spiritual food but also real food – the term developed today is comfort food – comfort food is meant to be universal, the simplest and plainest of recipes. We may all have our individual choices – some popular American choices are to start with the creamy like chicken potpie or macaroni and cheese. Those segue into soft meats: chicken, meatloaf, meatballs. Chocolate is its own category. And then there is crispness, Americans are most beloved of textures: Potato chips, fried chicken, Oreos. Despite their noisiness and chewing requirements, to leave them out would be un-American. For the British of course, fish and chips must rank towards the top. Yes food often goes beyond filling our stomachs and carries a psychological and spiritual component. Dutch professor, Louise Fresco, says it well when she writes,

Food, in the end, in our own tradition, is something holy. It's not about nutrients and calories. It's about sharing. It's about honesty. It's about identity.

I think the early disciples experienced this at the many meals they ate with Jesus through his lifetime , at the Last Supper, and at the meals after the resurrection. These simple sharings of foods gave them their identity as followers of the risen one.

It gives us our identity too, as a Eucharistic church we share this thanksgiving meal. Being at the rail binds us together. It's why with the publication of the new Prayer Book in 1980, the Episcopal Church restored the practice and strong encouragement of communion every Sunday. Would we call the communion we receive each Sunday "comfort food"? Well we have tried to up our game a little bit with freshly baked real bread and a little better brand of sherry for our communion wine. But that's only to make it seem more real, more solid, like we are receiving something of substance that makes a difference in our lives. Much like our daily meals give us strength and nourishment to keep us going in our lives, our Sunday eucharist gives us strength for mission to bring the presence of the risen Christ to those we know and our communities. Much like our daily meals bring us healing through the sharing of food and conversation and love, so should our eucharist bring us the personal healing we may be seeking. Much as our own meals bring us identity and community, so being spread out together at the communion rail, sharing the one bread and one cup, bring us identity and community as the Body of Christ.

Food, in the end, in our own tradition, is something holy. The feeling of satisfaction after a good meal is only a precursor or foretaste of the satisfaction of partaking in the heavenly banquet, of being a child of God, of living in God's light. As our psalmist today says:

> *You have put gladness in my heart,*
> *more than when grain and wine and oil increase.*
> *I lie down in peace; at once I fall asleep;*
> *for only you, LORD, make me dwell in safety.*

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