

What Would Jesus Eat?

There's old bumper sticker "Visualized Whirled Peas." Part of the joke is that whirled peas and world peace don't usually go together. If we think about peas or peace at all, we tend to put them in different categories, like pomegranates and philosophy, or mustard and metaphysics.. One category concerns the life of the mind and spirit, the other is what's for dinner. Matters of faith and ethics and religion 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.

Next time you're browsing through the fridge searching for a snack, here's something you might ponder: how many of the stories and parables of the New Testament deal with food?

- *Feeding the five thousand*
- *Turning water into wine .*
- *Jesus 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."•*
- *He tells stories about seeds and vineyards and sowers and harvests.*
- *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.*

I imagine you can think of many more. You can hardly turn a page of the gospels without encountering some culinary event.

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 a curious character, the one who also 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?" He explains that he and his disciples are going to ignore the traditional laws that require fasting on certain holidays, talking about new wine and old wineskins. 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 would need to know that food and drink are much more than means of bodily sustenance, but also markers of class and caste.

To explain what I mean, let me ask a question: Did any of you ever go to junior high school? (Show of hands.) Remember how all the geeks sit together in the cafeteria? All the nerds one table, and all the cool kids at another? And of course, the black students and the whites self-segregate. The junior high school lunch room is almost like a map showing who's got money and who doesn't, who's in and who's out. No one tells the students to sit that way. But kids have been dividing themselves this way for years, and adults for hundreds of years, and often the rules of who sits where get codified.

In Jesus' time, the dietary laws were among other things a means of separating holy people from the unclean, the pure from the impure. The issue of what one ate and with whom were means of establishing and maintaining a 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 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—that's how he got into trouble, by eating and drinking with wine bibbers and sinners—but in challenging all pecking orders.

You need to understand that he lived in a very stratified society, almost a kind of ancient apartheid. The Roman world was like Wall Street, magnified and exaggerated. The 1% owned everything. There was no middle-class, just the haves and have-nots. And if you weren't part of the elite, you were literally at their mercy. So Jesus was one of the original Occupiers, only his slogan was Occupy the Temple, because the Temple was where the tax records were kept. If you owed money, they had your number, which is why Jesus not only prayed "give us our daily bread" but also "forgive us our debts." He was pushing back against the power imbalance of those times. He was preaching a message of subversion, back when the prevailing culture was way worse than junior high school. Because if you were part of the ruling class, you not only had wealth, status, fashion and celebrity, you were blessed by the gods. But if you belonged to the 99%, you were nobody, an outcaste. And this was all reflected in the rules and customs of table fellowship.

As a modern parallel, Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan invites us to imagine a beggar coming to our door, asking 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 ... Think, again, if you were a large company’s CEO, of the difference between a cocktail party in the office for all the employees ... or a private dinner party for your vice presidents in your own home.”• Think of the ultimate symbol of corporate power, the boardroom, so-called because the executives gather round a board or common table. Now as two thousand years ago, rules of commensality separate the winners from the losers.

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. “Be compassionate,” he told his followers, “even as your Parent in Heaven is compassionate.” And I say Parent deliberately, because the word for compassion in Hebrew is related to the word for womb. A man feels compassion for his brother because they spring from the same uterus. A woman feels compassion for the child that is an expression of her own body. This kind of radical identification with the other is the message of the gospels. You have to put yourself in the other person’s shoes—particularly if the other person is so poor they don’t even own a pair of shoes. Otherwise you remain estranged, removed not only from your neighbor but ultimately from the source of human care and community, estranged finally from the womb, the source of life itself.

Now getting back into right relation has to start somewhere, and it could just as well start with food. Some spiritual traditions suggest that one might focus on the breath or on repetition of a mantra. But mindfulness and compassion could just as well begin by concentrating on how and what we eat--ingestion being a simple act that usually happens several times each day, but that like breathing often takes place without much deliberate thinking or awareness.

Of course, most of the great religions have recognized the spiritual dimensions of food, surrounding it with taboos and rituals that sanctify each meal and make it holy. What these religions all have in common is a message that food is not just a commodity. It’s not just a means of consuming nutrients to keep the body going. It’s not a past time, a form of self-medication, or entertainment. (Which is what it’s become for many Americans.) Rather, food is a way of connecting with the giver and the gift of life.

Eating is close to the central mystery of existence, the beautiful and tragic truth that some perish so that others can flourish. But food is also where nature and

culture meet, and the question of who lives and who suffers is as much a social and economic determination as it is being part of a food chain.

Conscious, compassionate, connected 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 immigrants who milk the cows and pick the apples here in New England, about rain forests felled and burned in Brazil to graze cattle for fast food chains and about the underpaid, often undocumented folks who work in slaughterhouses.

Conscious eating would mean asking why in a land where food has never been so plentiful tens of millions of Americans struggle to put food on the table. It would ask how just four companies can control three-quarters of the world's grain supply.

Conscious eating would look at the real costs of cheap food—costs paid not by agribusiness but paid for in medical bills by the consumers coping with epidemics of obesity, cancer, and heart disease.

Conscious eating would ask why America still struggles with malnutrition: not with rickets or pellagra or the kinds vitamin deficiencies that were common among our grandparents generation during the Depression, but with a malnutrition of “too much,” too much saturated fat, too much sodium, too much of our diet adulterated with hormones and antibiotics and pesticides and preservatives.

Compassionate eating would ask how factory farmed animals can be subject to forms of abuse and neglect that would result in a felony cruelty conviction if inflicted on a household dog or cat.

Conscious eating would ask how and why 75% of our corn crop and 90% of the soybeans grown in this country are now biotech, genetically modified. It would ask how anyone can own a genome or put a patent on life itself.

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, of solidarity, of the actual unity of life including the unseen suffering, in each and every bite.

So how would Jesus dine? At least one scholar, Keith Akers, argues that the historical Jesus may have been a vegetarian, based on the traditions of the Ebionites, an early Christian sect who traced their roots directly to the Jerusalem

Church and refrained from eating flesh. Probably we'll never know, except that as a first century Jew, he must have eaten a Mediterranean diet, with a lot of olives and lentils.

Yet we can be sure that he ate mindfully, in keeping with his vision of God's reign of justice and compassion. Eating in the Kingdom doesn't mean following strict rules--all steamed tofu and never a deep-fried pickle--at least not as I read 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.

So go ahead. Visualize world peace, starting with what you eat. Eating well can be a revolutionary act, and a spiritual one as well. Because you'll never get closer to the taste of heaven than with fresh, garden grown tomato. So don't only "do justice." *Chew justice*, love mercy, walk humbly. And bon appetit.