

“God the Cook”

Neil Engle
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Text: John 6:24-35

First Christian Church
115 Courthouse Plaza
Manhattan, Kansas 66502

This past week, Holly and I were able to spend a few days with my sister and her husband who live in Racine, Wisconsin, just south of Milwaukee. Now when we visit there I can count on a couple of things. First, my sister, Janet, will have a chocolate cake waiting for me. Second, while we're there, my brother-in-law, John, will do all the cooking. John's specialties are corn on the cob, brauts, and venison steaks. When John's cooking, we know it's best to stay out of the kitchen – he knows what he's doing and he likes to do things his way and he is a good cook. What makes a good cook? Julia Child, “You have to be hungry, and you have to enjoy working with your hands.”

Rubem Alves, a Brazilian Presbyterian theologian, makes an interesting observation related to cooks. He claims that God is a cook. As the cook is in the kitchen with the many ingredients of a meal, so God is with us. Listen as Alves speaks about a chef preparing food and God's dealings with us:

“Kitchen is a place of transformations. Nothing is allowed to remain the same. Fire and its allies are at work. . . . Things come raw, as nature produced them. They go out different, according to the demands of pleasure. The hard must be softened. Smells and tastes which were dormant inside are forced to come out: cooking is to give the magic kiss which wakes up sleeping pleasures. Alchemy, metamorphoses: cooking joins what nature has separated. Space is abolished. Salt, garlic, pepper, sugar, thyme, clove, parsley, oregano, cinnamon, paprika, cumin, celery, sage, tarragon, horseradish, curry powder, they are all invited, from the distant lands where they grow, to join the festival of cooking. The sweet, the sour, the bitter and the salty are forced to enter into non-existent combinations. Everything is a new creature, everything is made anew.”

In order “for this to happen the kitchen must be a place of destruction.”

“Knives are sharpened, in order to cut. Fire is lit, in order to boil and burn. If it is true that cooking joins together what nature has separated, it is also true that cooking puts asunder what is joined in nature. The raw must cease to exist for something different to appear. One must die first, in order to be resurrected. Baptism – being drowned in water – comes before the creation of a new life. When the soup boils in the pan something must be ceasing to be as it was, for a new, delightful thing to exist.”

“Cooking,” Rubem Alves explains, “is the art of making real what is unreal, of making present what is absent: a eucharistic metaphor.”

A eucharistic metaphor – we certainly have it in the scripture reading from the gospel of John. Jesus has just fed the 5,000 – and soon the crowd wants to crown Jesus king on the basis of giving away free bread. But Jesus runs the other way. And when the crowd, still hungry for those warm loaves of rye and pumpnickel, pursues Him to Capernaum, Jesus offers them no bread at all. These people are the ones who see Jesus as their meal ticket. So impressed and preoccupied are they with filled stomachs, they fail to see the feeding as a sign which points to the miraculous power of God in Jesus of Nazareth. They fail to see God the cook feeding the people with the Bread of Life.

Jesus was addressing an even more profound human hunger than food – that is, the craving we have to be connected to something beyond ourselves. Jesus is talking about the need to satisfy the deepest cravings of the human heart – a sense of connection – a feeling of belonging, an experience of community. Don't we all have that need? I think we all do – but I see it most keenly in teenagers. At church camp we've had to address an issue that was nonexistent five years ago – that is the proliferation of cell phone use among teens.

Now in the camps I've been involved with, cell phones have not been a problem – their use is limited – but it's still a fact of life. Instant messaging on the computer – blogging – my space.com-picture phones – text messaging. Gretchen had to teach me how to text message. I will never be as fast as she with that technology,

and certainly never as fast as the Utah teenager who two weeks ago set a new text messaging world record – a 160 character message in 42 seconds. The popularity of all these types of communications is testimony to the desire, the need, for young people especially to stay connected. I find it ironic that the more removed we get from face to face contact, the more options we have to communicate. Everyone needs to be connected to something or someone beyond themselves. A while back I read a fascinating book entitled *The Mole People: Life in Tunnels Beneath New York City*. It focuses on the hundreds of people who live underground in New York subway and train tunnels. Even those folk who are no longer part of the above ground world still long to be connected – even in the underground (pages 87-88):

Most tunnel dwellers prefer to be called “houseless” rather than “homeless.” More important than a warm apartment and cleaner life aboveground, many say, is belonging to a community, even if it is underground. I found most tunnel dwellers say they are members of communities of one kind or another, some with a barely recognized structure but others quite well-defined, including two types of “families.” In one, members refer to each other in terms of kinship – as nephews and nieces, papas and mamas, brothers and sisters, and cousins. They use these familiar terms as nominal evidence of affection and closeness. In the other, members claim to “adopt” each other to form a “true family” among whom ties are stronger than among their biological (and usually estranged) relatives. . . . Their community provides them with a sense of physical and psychological security and in their eyes also sets them apart, and above, the mass of homeless wandering the streets aboveground.

Jesus knows of this need for people to be connected – the desire to be in community – and that’s why He spends so much of His ministry eating and drinking with people. Eating and drinking are ways to express that connection – that sense of intimacy and unity. That’s why He fed the multitude. But He knew the craving for connection extends to the desire to be connected to something that is eternal and holy. That’s why He tells the people not to labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life. Trying to understand, the people ask what they must do to get the eternal bread – to be doing the works of God. As Jews, they’re still trying to behave like their fathers, who had to obey the laws of God for the manna in the wilderness.

These people wanted to be right. They hoped to hear Jesus list some achievements to which they could aspire, and which once accomplished, would assure them they were okay. We might hope to hear Jesus say, “To be doing the works of God, you need to gain recognition as a growing congregation, increase your outreach giving by 50%, and outfit your offices with the latest computer technology.” Or we might want to hear him list some morally right actions. “To be doing the works of God,” He’d say, “start a homeless shelter, pass laws to protect the rain forest, and increase your acceptance of those different from you.” Or we might expect Him to tell us how to show the world God’s goodness and justice. “To be doing the works of God,” He’d explain, “give money to alleviate world hunger and to eradicate poverty and racism in North America.” But Jesus says nothing like that. He tells them instead, “This is the work of God, that you should believe in the one God sent.” The word believe/believed occurs 80 times in the gospel of John, but only 11 times in each of the other gospels. Obviously, faith is critical in the theology of John’s gospel.

Jesus tells them what God’s real work for them is – to believe – to believe in the Son who had come to them. It’s as if Jesus is saying to them, and to us, “Look, I know you want to connect with something eternal and holy – so connect with me. Believe in me. I am the Bread of Life.” Like the simple folk they were, the people cite the only similar instance they knew – Moses’ feeding of their fathers on manna in the wilderness. It was their recollection of this that had spurred them, the day before, to hail Jesus as a prophet and trying to make him a king. “No,” Jesus says, “Moses didn’t give them their bread, God did.” And it was God, God the cook, who was now trying to give them the true bread from heaven, bread which gives life to the world, not some mere sign, such as the manna, or the multiplication of loaves and fish. How do we feed on the Bread of Life? How do we connect?

Jesus has one word for us – believe. Jesus says, “I am the Bread of Life, he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.” Believe. In what or in whom do we really believe? I mean really, really, really, really believe? Believing in Jesus Christ is the way to connect, the way to get fed. If we are feeding on anything or anyone other than Jesus Christ, we are seriously and spiritually malnourished.

Let me repeat that. If we are feeding on anything or anyone other than Jesus Christ, we are seriously and spiritually malnourished.

One writer puts it this way: "If our physical condition is not up to par, we run to the physician. If we are frustrated, despondent, filled with a sense of failure, aimlessness, and lost meaning, we don't get quite as upset. We long for peace of mind, fulfillment, and a well-rounded life. We aspire, but fall short of spiritual awareness. This means: Get to know Christ – read and reread the gospels; live with Him – talk to Him in your prayers; love Him – give Him the edge of your affection over the things you crave for and want; and let His presence daily permeate your whole lifestyle. That is a tall order. It is a holy diet."

How connected to Jesus Christ are we? Would you like that connection to be stronger?

This story from John is a reminder that God the cook not only provides wonderful morsels for the taste buds, but also feeds our hearts, by connecting us with the eternal, and by giving us the gift of the Bread of Life. Though our appetites may come and go, we are still mysteriously nourished and sustained by God. We cannot and do not live by bread alone. We thrive by the hearty welcome God gives us. We grow up nourished by God's acceptance. And fortified with that love, we can go a long way.

Let us pray: O God, we are ravenous, hungry people. We have pigged out on entertainment. We have binged on new gadgets. We have munched on do-it-ourselves salvation plans. And we find we are still hungry. Lord, now we are ready for some real food. Nourish us with Jesus Christ, and with your word that flavors our life with purpose. Feed us with your acceptance that gives us confidence to go on. Let us find a welcome at your table, where our deepest cravings are satisfied, where we feel connected to you and Jesus Christ. Amen.