

Disciplines of Readiness: Eat Freedom Food
Isaiah 55:1-3

This week, I felt fear rise in my stomach, like a wave of nausea, when I heard about the killings of mostly Asian women in Atlanta. For several months now, there have been signs that discrimination against people of Asian descent was rising in our country. In our own community: a member of our Ministry Team was present almost a year ago, to see a white person hold their breath and rush out of an elevator at El Camino Hospital because an Asian person had entered the same space. It's shameful, this irrational connecting of racial identity and pandemic; it's unintelligent; it's poisonous. And it is real.

I want to say to you this morning that as people of faith and compassion, it is our duty—each of us—to put ourselves physically in the way of this variant strain of racism. Stand with your Asian neighbors, out loud, visibly. Check in with them to see if they're OK, and to offer friendship and support. Set yourself apart, intentionally, from the culture's need to blame some 'Other' for the coronavirus pandemic. Some things you can't do anything about. This one, you can.

It is easy to respond to social problems by searching out and condemning 'bad people', the ones who hate others, the ones who consciously harbor the belief that white lives matter most. But I'm pretty sure the One whose life I'm trying to make mine resemble didn't do that. I think about the way Jesus talked to men who were ready to throw stones at a woman who had been sexually humiliated. The way he told a story, without condemnation or even snarkiness, about religious professionals who would cross the street to avoid noticing someone who'd been injured. All of them 'deplorables' who no doubt would have drawn my righteous anger, maybe even my readiness to throw them away. None of them did Jesus consider beyond the reach of his attention, or unworthy of finding and reclaiming.

So if I am really going try to look with the eyes of Jesus at the world as it is, I might have to hold even hateful people, people who look clearly to me like racists, as capable of redemption as I hope I am. I might have to let my heart warm up enough to see that perhaps they too are motivated by fear. Fear of something at loose in the world that cannot be controlled, fear that life is changing in ways that make it unrecognizable. Fear that gnaws at you, like a hunger that must be fed. This is how humans often feed that hunger: they find someone to blame. They stuff themselves with the delicious junk food that hatred tastes like.

In our tradition there's a gigantic, almost unending, set of food metaphors. The original sin of Adam and Eve was eating forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. When Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery, they'd barely scraped the Red Sea mud off their shoes before their mouths started watering for the red meat ('fleshpots' they called it) they'd eaten in Egypt. God sent manna instead—enough flaky bread to satisfy their hunger every day, but their tastebuds not-so-much. From then on, the most important holiday the people of God celebrated every year was a Passover *meal*. When Jesus went out into the wilderness to get ready for his ministry, it was bread that the Devil used to tempt him to break his loyalty to God. Jesus's most impressive miracles, the ones that every storyteller told about him, were feeding stories—the ones about him taking small amounts of food and turning them into enough for everyone. When he knew his life was ending, Jesus chose a meal as the ritual for his followers to remember him by. A divided loaf

of bread, a cup of wine they could drink together. Remember me, Jesus said, every time you eat together. “I *am* the bread of life,” the Gospel writer John remembered him saying, much later.

And when the disciples were out on a boat in a storm, as afraid as they’d ever been, sure they would die any minute, Jesus chided them for fearing that he’d left them alone. ‘You never did understand the miracle of the bread, did you?’ he said to them. *If you understood that there will always be enough food, you would know that you never have to be afraid.*

Food. It is an absolute necessity of existence; and so it’s easily packed with meaning, and emotion, and symbolism. It always has been.

Like most women of my generation, I grew up sure that the dimensions of my body were all wrong. For years—decades, actually—of my life, I’d swing back and forth between overeating and punishing myself with diets. I lost the same 20 pounds again and again and again. I thought it was just me. It wasn’t, of course; this is a pattern for many people, maybe especially women. A writer named Geneen Roth captured what is true for probably millions of people. We eat, she said, to fill not only our physical needs, but our emotional needs.

“We eat when we are lonely. We eat when we are sad. We eat when we are bored. We eat when we are angry, grieving, frustrated, frightened, even happy. We eat because we don’t know what to do with our feelings and food is here, there, everywhere. It’s cheap, it tastes good, and it doesn’t talk back. If we are ever going to solve the serious problems that result from emotional eating...we need to understand that the main reason people eat is to feed their hungry hearts.”ⁱ

And because the food we are putting in our mouths is not the food our hearts really seek, we are never full, never satisfied. Gluttony, Frederick Buechner once wrote, is ‘going to the refrigerator to satisfy a spiritual hunger.’

Sometimes we know what we’re hungry for. You just want something in your life to go right for once, or for people to stop disappointing you. You long with all your heart for a baby, or for a reconciliation with someone you love, and it’s not happening. You want escape from a job that is grinding you down, and no alternative is taking shape. You yearn for a time you remember as simpler, or when you were clearer about your place in the world.

But sometimes our hunger has no name. It’s a sort of vague restlessness, a craving for something unidentified. All it knows is that it hasn’t found what it’s looking for. This is the condition that’s most susceptible to the kind of gluttony Buechner is talking about. These are the moments that tempt us to fill our hungry souls with the things that only pretend to be food: more things, more money, overwork, trying to control the people around us. We stuff ourselves with exercise, self-help tips, information, even news. And none of it finds its way to our empty spot.

*Why spend money for what isn’t food,
and your earnings for what doesn’t satisfy? [Isaiah asked the people in exile]
Listen carefully to me and eat what is good;
enjoy the richest of feasts.*

Eat the food that will meet your hunger. Anything else is only junk food, empty calories that cannot satisfy.

There's a curious story that comes from the time of the Babylonian exile. It's in the first chapter of the book of Daniel. Daniel is one of the heroes of the Jewish exile. Once they arrived in Babylon, Daniel and his friends got themselves jobs in the government, inside King Nebuchadnezzar's palace. Lavish meals came with their employment, the kind of meat and butter and rich food spreads that had not been part of the Israelites' diet for generations. Think fleshpots from the Egypt days. Surely Nebuchadnezzar's meals would have been tastier and more stomach-filling than the vegetarian fare Daniel and his buddies had been used to. But they refused to eat the king's food. And because they ate only vegetables, the story goes, they got stronger, and more capable, every day.

This story is about not giving in to cultural pressures that steer you away from God. Of course it is. But I wonder if it isn't also about knowing what it is you're hungry for. What Daniel and the other Israelites were missing, what their insides were starving for, was home. They were a thousand miles from their country, and it probably felt like a thousand years since they'd been there. Stuffing themselves with the rich food that was easily available in this new place might have masked their homesickness for a little while, but it couldn't fill the hunger that sat somewhere deeper inside of them than their stomachs. Somehow they knew that. They stuck to the food that would remind them of who they were, who they wanted to be, the place where they belonged. Freedom food.

There's a discipline in resisting tasty-but-unhealthy food, of course. But the harder discipline might be sitting with your hunger, letting yourself feel it until you know what it is you're hungry for. I know I often fill the emptiness in my stomach before I ever actually feel hunger. It's lunchtime; time to eat! I think I do the same thing with the hungers that go all the way down to my soul. I rush to put things in place that will distract my attention, keep me from experiencing the discomfort of knowing what I lack and long for most: connection, belonging, feeling understood. How will I know what I am hungry for, and what will fill the deepest hunger inside of me, if I stuff myself full all the time?

The traditional spiritual practice of Lent is fasting, letting hunger live inside of you. Fasting is a physical practice with a spiritual intention. Food deprivation itself has no value to God; look at how often God has moved to feed hungry people. What does have value is the experience of knowing, listening to, your own hunger; believing it has something important to tell you

There are just two weeks left in this Lent. It's still enough time to practice. Actually this one week in front of you right now is long enough to practice. So is this day. So today, I'm inviting you to feel your hunger. Sit with it; don't push it away with positive thoughts or by telling yourself 'I'm fine,' when you're not fine at all. Let your soul tell you what it needs, even if you don't have any idea how to fill that need.

Listen to Jesus say to you what he said to those disciples out in the storm: 'You never did understand the miracle of the bread, did you?' *If you understood that there will always be enough food, you would know that you never have to be afraid.*

And then wait for the food that will feed the deepest hunger inside of you. Insist on it; eat only the food that will fill you. The food that will free you.

ⁱ Geneen Roth, *Feeding the Hungry Heart*, 1982