

“Give Us This Day, Part II: Eat This Book”

Rev. Rachel Cornwell

Woodside UMC, August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2006

Scripture: John 6:35, 41-51

G.K. Chesterton and several other literary figures were once asked what book they would prefer to have with them if they were stranded on a desert island.

“The complete works of Shakespeare,” said one writer without hesitation.

“I choose the Bible,” said another.

“How about you?” they asked Chesterton.

“I would choose Thomas’ *Guide to Practical Shipbuilding*,” replied Chesterton.

If your purpose is to get off the island, then the Guide to Practical Shipbuilding is the right choice. However, there are many times when we read the Bible as if it were one in the same as that Guide to Practical Shipbuilding—as if it were just an instruction manual or a reference book, or an historical novel. Perhaps those are acceptable ways of reading the Bible—after all, at least we are reading it, right? But I think that we really ought to read scripture is the way that Jesus did, as if it’s bread. So before we dine on the scripture this morning’s scripture, let us pray...

Have you ever seen a dog devour a bone? If you have ever, you know that it can take a dog a long time of persistently licking and chewing and gnawing to consume a bone. Sometimes it can even take days. And as a dog eats, he sometimes growls and sighs, companion sounds of pleasure and effort. This is the image that Eugene Peterson, the Biblical scholar who is most well known for his new translation of the Bible The Message, uses to describe how we really ought to read scripture. He has recently published a book on what he calls “spiritual reading” called Eat This Book and in it he writes:

*Christians feed on scripture. Holy Scripture nurtures the whole community as food nurtures the human body. Christians don’t simply learn or study or use scripture; we assimilate it, take it into our lives in such a way that it gets metabolized into acts of love, cups of cold water, missions into all the world, healing and evangelism and justice in Jesus’ name, hands raised in adoration of the Father, feet washed in company with the Son.*

Perhaps it seems strange to us to think of scripture is something to be eaten, even in a metaphorical sense. But there are many instances in the Bible where people do just that. The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel both do as God commands, and eat scrolls—they devour the word of God so that they might speak the message that God has for the people. In Revelation, John is also told by the angel of the Lord to eat the Words of God,

which are “sweet to the mouth, but bitter to the stomach,” so that he may give a vision to the people that will sustain them in the midst of suffering.

Our Gospel lesson this morning continues with Jesus talking about eating and about bread. But as we have seen, Jesus is really talking about much more than that. In fact, the word that is translated as “eat,” is almost shockingly graphic: it means to eat noisily, and is often used to describe animals (“gnaw,” “nibble,” “munch”). In this text there are layers of meaning—there’s the literal feeding, and a connection there to the Eucharist and spiritual food (the table), which we talked about last week. But there’s a more **symbolic** element to the eating which Jesus speaks of in the discourse as well, a personal **receiving** of Christ and his work. And this is the Word—the second part of our Christian worship life.<sup>1</sup>

The message that Jesus has for hungry people is that we should feast on spiritual food—the word and the sacraments—because they will sustain our souls as well as our bodies. But as he continues in this story to speak to the people about food, about bread, and because he offers them bread that will satisfy them forever, the bread of life, the bread of heaven, he raises the concerns and complaints of his detractors because they don’t understand. How can this man say that he has come from heaven? Isn’t this the same Jesus from Nazareth? We have known him his whole life; we know his mother and father. What kind of blasphemy is this?

Jesus recognizes as they are talking about Moses and manna, that they, just like their ancestors, are grumbling in the face of God’s gift. They still don’t understand that God is offering them not only the food that will sustain them, but a new relationship with God in which they will never again experience hunger.

And Jesus, of course, knew the scripture well. But while the religious authorities used the scripture as law—to measure who was in and who was out, to define faithfulness rather than lead people to faith—Jesus is the Word of God, the Logos (Law-goss), the action of God: he is compassion, wisdom he is God’s presence among the simple, poor people opening the way to God for all of us.

Jesus invites them and us, too, to receive the Word of God and to feast on the bread of life because it is meant to nourish and sustain us, to become part of us. And when we do, we are transformed—and we no longer read the Word of God as if it were just words on a page—it is the bread of life.

This week I participated in an interfaith text study focusing on the issue of immigration. One of the facilitators was an Episcopalian priest, Padre Simon Bautista Betances. He talked about his experience of living in a Latin American base community—the small, rural, impoverished villages that birthed the way of reading scripture that we now call liberation theology. He said that reading the Book of Exodus with a group of *campesinos* gave him a new understanding of the concepts of slavery, freedom and deliverance.

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<sup>1</sup> “Exegetical Commentary on John 6,” by W. Hall Harris, III, [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org)

These people taught him that the Bible was not just a collection of stories and historical documents—it holds words of life and hope; it is bread for hungry people.

-John Ortberg, The Life You've Always Wanted:

Some years ago, when I was in Ethiopia, I learned about ... a 99-year-old woman who lived about two hours outside Addis Ababa, the capital city. This woman had become a follower of Christ in middle age, and she was both blind and illiterate. She lived in a little hut, where she kept two Bibles on her table - one in Amharic (the official language of Ethiopia), one in English. Whenever someone came to visit her, she would ask the person to read. Over time, her favorite passages became so familiar that she could recite them from memory, and if her visitors couldn't read, she would recite as a kind of gift to them.

People would come from far away just to visit her. Why would they make the journey for an elderly, illiterate, blind widow? Because somehow in her presence, through her voice, the words "The Lord is my shepherd" ceased to be just words. Those thoughts had washed over her mind so deeply, so often, that there was simply no way that anxiety-producing thoughts could survive. In purity of heart, she willed one thing. People flocked to her because it was impossible to hear her say those words without being filled with the hope that perhaps one day they would be as real to them as they were to her.

Like the campesinos and the Ethiopian widow, the Word of God is our sustenance too, it has words of hope and liberation that we long to hear. And perhaps you already have a good diet of scripture in your life. But maybe you don't. Maybe we have just gotten out of the habit of reading and studying scripture, or maybe we never developed the habit to begin with. Maybe you find it too difficult to read and understand on your own, or think that this Book is irrelevant for your life, or you are intimidated by this book that is supposed to be so important for our faith, but which very few of us really know and understand. I know that I personally find that I struggle to find the time to read and meditate on scripture and sometimes have found that the only time during the week that I am reading scripture is when I am preparing a sermon.

If you are looking for more ways to get the Word into your daily diet, maybe you could download an audio version of the Bible onto your iPod to listen to on the bus or Metro, or get a CD to listen to in your car. Or perhaps you want to check out some of the new classes that we are going to be offering here at Woodside this fall: I am going to be teaching three, three week long "Christian refresher courses" for Adults on Sunday mornings, 9:30-10:30 in the Chapel and the first is going to be called "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time/ Bible 101 (thanks to Marcus Borg for that title) or maybe you would like to drop by our monthly coffee and conversations "Mondays @ Mayorga" at Mayorga Coffee Factory every second Monday of the month from 8:00-9:00 PM. If you are hungry for the Word, I would like to encourage you to come and check it out.

So I leave you with this invitation from Peterson once again: "come to the table and eat this book, for every word in the book is intended to do something in us, give health and wholeness, vitality and holiness to our souls and body."

