

It's been an interesting summer of Bible readings and thoughtful interpretations of the texts. Early with Bob, we discussed family and how it is depicted in both the Old and New Testaments, with the final observation that one would have to say Jesus was not a 'family man'. Mary talked about forgiveness in light of the horrendous shootings in Charleston – a New Testament way of living. And Ed talked about the difference in the stories in the Old Testament and in the New – suggesting, most interestingly that the New Testament teachings are the foundation of our form of government in the U.S. – a liberal democracy.

So there has been a regular comparison between the Old Testament and the new in this pulpit. The Old Testament talks of conflict and revenge; typical historical stories of old civilizations. Some of the Psalms are hard to take because so many horrors are heaped on the enemy. No forgiveness in sight there, but in the New Testament, forgiveness is a major theme. It has been a challenge – which many of our speakers have taken on - to reconcile what we read in the Old Testament with the readings in the New.

Today we heard the story of David and Bathsheba, a tale of adultery and murder. These conflicts are the backbone of great literature – as well as movies, pulp fiction, opera and art. It's the 'stuff' of the human condition.

I thought about using the David and Bathsheba story for today's talk, but I was also looking at the stories of family conflict in the Old Testament. Have you noticed that every brother story in the Old Testament is one of intense conflict; Cain slays Able, Jacob betrays Esau, Jacob's son Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers – no brothers seem to get along. And the only sister story I can think of is when Laban tricks Jacob, who has fallen in love with his daughter Rachel, into marrying Rachel's older sister Leah. Jacob and Rachel have to wait 7 more years before they can marry. There is little doubt that sisterly love was a challenge for Leah and Rachel.

Father Donahue told this story of Jacob and Rachel at the marriage ceremony of Kate and Duke. He focused, not on the sisters, but on the example of steadfast and patient love that Jacob had for Rachel and how he labored for 14 years to marry her.

But as I was thinking about what to talk about today, something else in the texts caught my attention. The alternative text today, which I read just before, is 2nd Kings 4:42-44. The story of Elisha, who was the appointed successor to Elijah, distributing food. First he turned poisonous food into wholesome food and then he took the first fruits and corn and loaves of barley and fed hundreds of people.

The story from the New Testament that we read, John 6; 1-21 is the story of the miracle of the loaves and fishes. They are the same story, which doesn't often happen with the selected texts from the Old and the New Testaments.

And they are both about FOOD. So instead of talking about family conflict, trying to reconcile the stories of the Old and New Testaments or forgiveness, I decided to talk about food.

Once I decided that this could be a good topic, it seemed that everywhere I looked – there was something being said or written about food.

Last Sunday's paper had an article on Alice Waters. It was written by Mark Bittman, who is the co-editor with Sam Sifton of the Food section of the NEW YORK TIMES. AS an aside, I find it interesting that Sam Sifton is the Grandson of Reinhold Niebuhr. Food is obviously close to theology.

Mark Bittman wrote; Alice started a homey little restaurant, Chez Panisse, in North Berkley and began searching for simple, local food and featuring it while supporting, encouraging and even nurturing the farmers who produced it. And she established the Edible Schoolyard Project. (this is something we have now in our local schools – sponsored, in part, by the Catskill Mountainkeeper) In doing so, Alice has re-defined American cuisine. Alice Waters didn't just bring attention to simple fresh food; her focus changed the way millions eat.

The Sunday paper also announced a Food Conference at Stone Barns Center in Pocantico Hills, NY where they will be talking about food *policy*.

Monday, I saw an NRDC Video posted on Facebook that reports that 40% of food grown in America is thrown away even before it is eaten. (I can't help but feel a lot of this wasted food comes from restaurants that give enormous servings) The USDA and the EPA have launched a 'Food Waste Challenge'.

Then there are the many books about food - **Fast food Nation, Supersize Me ,Animal Vegetable Miracle and Carnivores Delima and countless more.**

And of course there is the on-going controversy about food production --- what Monsanto has done to our potatoes and wheat--- about genetically altered food- about the use of pesticides and herbicides - there is no doubt that food is also very political.

And enjoyable to read about ----on my bookshelf at home is Andrew Todhunter's, Tim Foote's son, "A Meal Observed." A wonderful book that tells of Andrew's work at Taillevent for months before he and his wife enjoy a 5 hour meal there. . He also manages to give us interesting facts on salt and chocolate.

While I was observing all the attention to food, I read an article in the New Yorker on the medieval Epic, **Beowulf, the oldest surviving long poem in the English Language - written between the 8th and 11 C. So I looked at the poem again. This passage struck me.**

The high Hafdane - Hrothgar, came to the throne. For a long time it ran continually in Hrothgar's mind that he would give orders to build a banquet hall, one greater than the children of men had ever heard of. So he sent orders far and wide to many tribes of kinsmen, and it happened very quickly that the greatest of hall-buildings, wide between the gables and towering high into the heavens, was all ready. The King named it Heorot.

The king distributed rings and treasures at his feasts. There was heard the sound of the harp and the sweet music of the bard. Thus the noble warriors lived prosperously, in joy, until a grim stranger began to perform terrible deeds. The powerful spirit who dwelt in the dark places could hardly endure, even for a little while, that he should hear loud mirth in the hall. He was called Grendel, a great monster who inhabited the moors, the fens.

And if you remember the story, the monster Grendel seizes and devours many of the Danes and wreaks havoc until Beowulf comes to slay him.

What interested me about this tale, because I was thinking about food, is that it was the dining together—having a great hall where people came to feast and play music—that drove Grendel, who knew only the lonely moors and fens – into a fury. This ancient tale is perhaps about the change for humans from roaming the wild and living solitarily into becoming a community, the beginnings of civilization.

This encouraged me to look further in our Cultural history on the subject of food so I Googled 'Food and The Odyssey' and got thousands of sites. But I decided not to go there.

There is politics in food, moral commitment in food, just plain survival in food. But also a great deal of symbolism.

So let's return to the two Bible stories and see what they say about the role of food in a spiritual life. They are both the story of a miracle – Elisha and Jesus feed multitudes from a few loaves of barley and some fish. It has been suggested that these stories are about sharing – that when Jesus, or Elisha began to break bread and share it, everyone who had brought a little sustenance with them also shared it. So food is more than just sustenance here, it is a way of sharing, being a part of a community.

AS I was doing this research and thinking about talking about food, I checked the schedule and – low and behold—today is Communion! These two Bible stories we've been talking about support but are secondary to perhaps the most symbolic story of food in the New Testament. The Last Supper.

When we moved to Garrison years ago =- our son John Hamilton was about 7 years old. The Monastery at Graymoor was just across the road from where we lived. One cold January morning I was driving the children to school and we passed the statue of the crucifix at the entrance to Graymoor. John Hamilton said, "Why do they have Jesus hanging out in the freezing cold – he should be inside eating with his friends."

Well, I think Jesus would agree – he chose a meal to be his symbolic event, The Last Supper, which has become the ritual of Communion.

For years I did not participate in this church ritual – I was not so keen on even symbolically eating the flesh and blood of Christ.

But when Mary changed the invitation to partake of the bread and wine in our own personal way, in remembrance, in thanksgiving – not necessarily transubstantiation making the wine/juice blood and the bread flesh, but having communion be a remembrance, a meditation, I felt comfortable participating in this ritual.

Fredrick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister who has written a number of books of the spiritual life observed.

WE DON'T LIVE BY BREAD ALONE, but we also don't live long without it. To eat is to acknowledge our dependence - both on food and on each other. It also reminds us of other kinds of emptiness that not even the blue-plate special can touch.

It is also called Holy Communion because, when feeding at this implausible table, Christians believe that they are communing with the Holy One himself, his spirit enlivening their spirits, heating the blood, and gladdening the heart just the way wine, as spirits, can.

They are also, of course, communing with each other. To eat any meal together is to meet at the level of our most basic need. It is hard to preserve your dignity with butter on your chin, or to keep your distance when asking for the tomato ketchup.

To eat this particular meal together is to meet at the level of our most basic humanness, which involves our need not just for food but also for each other. I need you to help fill my emptiness just as you need me to help fill yours. As for the emptiness that's still left over, well, we're in it together, or it in us. Maybe it's most of what makes us human and makes us brothers and sisters.

The Last Supper is also called the Eucharist, which is Greek for Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving is a unique American Holiday. Thus our hymn of preparation. It is a day totally focused on food- but food shared, often with family but always, if possible, with others. It is a day of commitment to that single activity- time spent gathering, hunting (in the old days) preparing, consuming – and of course, cleaning up. There are no gifts, new outfits, firecrackers to distract us from the focus of the day, breaking bread together.

Eating – no matter what, no matter if alone or with people – can be a form of Thanksgiving and meditation. This is part of the tradition of giving thanks or offering a

blessing before a meal. The most common prayer before meals “Bless this food to our use and us to they service” – a simple but thoughtful prayer.

WE can take this part of Thanksgiving and make it personal. Being aware of what you are doing when you are either preparing or eating food, can be a very ‘Zen’ thing. For instance, by meditating on what we put into our mouths – and in a way ‘thanking’ that fish, or chicken or steer for the nourishment we are receiving – ties us into the whole animal world. By feeling the crunch of a raw carrot, or the smooth taste of a new potato – and letting that tie us into the gifts of our earth. Just eating a BLT with some iced tea ties us to the earth, the animal kingdom, the wheat, lettuce and tomato from the land, the baker who baked the bread, the people who gathered the tea leaves – it ties us to humankind and is a reminder to honor the earth and the fruits thereof.

By sitting together, sharing our food, we can experience the love that is present in our lives – we just have to be still a bit, contemplate what we are doing and feel the fullness of life ..

Again from Fredrick Buechner:

“Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis **all** moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.”

— Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then: A Memoir of Vocation*