

The Spirituality of the Stomach

Lake Street Church of Evanston

Rev. Michael Woolf

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Today we are going to talk about the stomach a lot. I expect there to be a mad rush on the coffee hour snacks after I get done talking. Everyone has a friend who is ruled by their stomach. You know – that one friend who you think is there with you doing whatever activity it is, and then you turn around and they're suddenly gone, only to show up minutes later with some wonderful bit of food. Some folks just have a knack for it. I had a buddy in college that was a well-known flake, you couldn't count on him to meet you anywhere, but once you got to know him, you found out it really wasn't his fault. He would just get distracted by really good food on his way everywhere. If you were on the way somewhere with him, you would be in for a treat – oh this place has a really good burger, let's try one.

The amount of times that this happened in my friendship with him was too many to count. You knew that if you were in his car on the way somewhere that you were not going to get there on time, and no amount of fast driving could make up for it. And I can never read this passage from John without thinking about him. Here is Jesus. He is freshly alive again, and instead of some big heady statement or teaching, he pauses, grins, and says, "yeah, but have you guys had breakfast?" I love how human it is to think that one of the big breaks in the resurrection is to eat. I always think back to us late to a wedding and stopping to get some fried pickles at a place he likes. Yes, there's a really important event about to happen, but have you had these fried pickles? No. Ok, we're stopping.

I think the point of this text is to show that Jesus isn't a ghost – that's why the Gospel writer put it in, and it seems to be what the disciples originally thought about Jesus. But what I also take from it is that food is about relationships. The same guy who shares a final meal with his disciples can't stop eating and drinking with them. It's a table fellowship that they need.

In a similar way our reading from a sutra this morning means that what we eat matters because it's about our relationships, that our relationships extend even beyond the grave to the boundless realms of heaven and beyond. We are never really gone, and our relationships remain in what we eat and who we share it with.

And these are good introductions to the spirituality of the stomach – because there is a theme that is used time and time again in scripture to define what a

relationship with the divine is supposed to look like. **It is supposed to be characterized by hunger.** We are supposed to hunger for the presence of the divine. We are supposed to feel it in our stomachs just as much as we are supposed to feel it in our head and our heart. Hunger – the stand in for desire that is so fervent it restricts our field of vision.

The fact that hunger persists in our world is a terrible tragedy. If you look at the figures, we could eradicate hunger, but our consumption habits and our priorities mean that we lack the will to eliminate it. Hunger is one of the longest lasting evils that is still amongst us, right up there with poverty and pestilence, and often playing a role in the other 2. Hunger is an evil thing.

And at least on the smallest level it is something that we all experience. We know what it's like to be hungry, and some know what real hunger feels like. Hunger after a day of hard work makes all food taste good – “hunger is the best sauce” they say. But it is the constant reminder of what is lacking as well – namely food.

So the question is not whether you love the Divine with your heart or your mind, and you should, don't get me wrong. The question is also whether you are hungering after the Holy with your gut.

To hunger after the holy is also to hunger after justice and righteousness, and because we live in the world that we do live in at this moment, there is plenty of hunger for those things afoot. We long for them without receiving what we long for. Some more than others. We feel our stomachs rumble over mass shootings, immigration policies and detention that are cruel, anti-LGBT measures, and a host of other injustices alive and well in 21st century America. I pray for justice, but I am oftentimes left hungry, sent away without the food I so desire. That's a part of this back and forth that we have with the Holy; it's not about satisfaction a lot of the time, and that gives rise to doubt and hunger, deep hunger.

I want to talk to you also about a different kind of hunger that I experience here. I have had a lot of conversations with folks, and there seems to be a hunger to be more and to do more, and that's good. But the thing about hunger is that it puts blinders on you, so that all you can focus on is the feeling of being hungry. Like my friend, you were off course to get fried pickles when you should be at a wedding. You're blinkered. And I see that here. Folks, you often are so down on yourselves. About who you are or where you are in your journey as a community.

What I want to tell you is that perhaps your hunger for more has blinded you to what is already here. Folks, this is a heck of a church. I am so excited to be here with you. I uprooted my family and moved a thousand miles away to come pastor a church that I think is pretty awesome. Don't get me wrong, we could be better and we have

challenges – all churches do. But this is a heck of a church. In fact, I want you to turn to your neighbor and say, “neighbor, this is a heck of a church.” There. Now it’s out there. I mean it too – we have every opportunity to do some great things here. We are a heck of a church, and we can be even better, but I want to say – hey, enough of the being down. Let’s instead move forward to light and love and laughter. Let’s have fun again.

So hunger for the right thing. Hunger for the divine. For a closer connection, for more justice, but don’t get so blinkered you miss what’s here, because friends, this is a heck of a church.

May you get some good old-fashioned gut religion, like our ancient wisdom teaches. May you hunger and find satisfaction. May you not miss who is across from you at this sacred table where we come to meet the Holy in all of us. May you not miss it, because it is so easy to miss it.