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TWELFTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST August 31, 2014

“You Are What You Eat”

(Jeremiah 15:16)

Rev. David K. Groth

“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight” (Jer. 15:16).

Collect of the Day

Almighty God, Your Son willingly endured the agony and shame of the cross for our redemption. Grant us courage to take up our cross daily and follow Him wherever He leads; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

The queen is the most important bee in the honeybee colony. She lays the eggs that sustain the population. She keeps order in the hive. She gives directions. The queen honeybee . . . she's the boss. She's the real beekeeper.

What happens then to a colony whose queen has died? That hive is doomed . . . unless it can make a new queen. And bees actually know how to do that. The worker bees, when they sense the queen is dead, dying or dysfunctional, they'll choose a cell that already has an egg in it or a very young larva. And they'll start feeding that larva with nothing but royal jelly. This is a secretion of a certain gland of the worker bee. It contains water and protein and amino acids. It contains sugars and minerals and enzymes and antibacterial and antibiotic components and a long list of vitamins. When a larva starts feeding on this royal jelly, it triggers a cascade of molecular changes in that larva that will turn it into a queen. In the beehive at least, you are what you eat! If a larva is given nothing but royal jelly and lots of it, it will grow up to be a queen.

By the way, who taught those bees how to do that? Who showed them how to feed a young larva with royal jelly? Who gave them the recipe for royal jelly? To simply dismiss all that as happy accident is, I think, intellectually lazy. Or, as the psalmist says, "The fool says in his heart there is no god" (Ps. 14:1). Albert Einstein put it this way: "Either nothing is a miracle, or everything is."

In any event, in the beehive, you are what you eat. So also for people. You are what you eat. What we take in from the internet, what we read, what we watch on TV, all that has an impact on who we are, what we believe, what our values are. That's why so many autocratic nations control what their people see on mass media . . . because they want to control what their people believe,

think and value. And that's why you also have to use your freedom in this country responsibly, and make wise choices about what you consume, what you watch, what pay to see. If we fill our brains and hearts mostly with garbage, we can expect it will mostly be garbage that comes out in terms of our desires and values and beliefs.

In the Old Testament lesson, Jeremiah says, "When your words came, I ate them." It surprises me every time I read that. It's a way of saying the Word of the Lord permeated Jeremiah's innermost being. Similarly, the Lord once told Ezekiel, "'Eat this scroll and fill your stomach with it.' So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth" (Ezek. 3:3). This is why Martin Luther wrote, "Read, mark, learn and *inwardly digest*" God's Word. They're all saying the same thing. God's Word is our spiritual food. Therefore it's so important to feed on his Word regularly, consistently. If "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ" as Paul wrote (Rom. 10:17), then faith is also sustained by hearing the Word of Christ.

I had a professor at UW who told us she and her husband decided to put away the T.V.'s in their house for a year. They read more books and exercised more. No surprise there. But what did surprise them was how often those around them alluded to what everyone was watching on T.V. and how she now had no idea what they were talking about. She found herself out of the loop, on the outside of conversations looking in. And the lesson she took from it was what enormous influence T.V. was having on our culture. Add to that the internet and social media and we kid ourselves if we think all that doesn't shape who we are and what we believe, what we value. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah and he ate it. What's in your diet? What are your kids eating?

It's so important to monitor ourselves and our kids. And it's equally important to appropriate the Word of the Lord. Make it your own. Of course this has implications for Christian education, doesn't it? Whether the children are coming here or going to a public school, either way, they

need to know Christ. Today children are growing up with so many other voices vying for their attention. Clearly they need to be in worship so that God's Word has a fighting chance to pierce through all that clamor.

We teach our kids to know the multiplication chart like the back of their hands. We drill them on it until the answer comes from their spinal column rather than their brain. I never learned it that well. I still have to pause and think about what 8 times 7 is. and that haunted me all the way through algebra and calculus and statistics in college.

Similarly, serious music students are taught to play the scales over and over until they hardly have to think about them anymore. It's dull. It's laborious, and it's a time proven method of music instruction.

When I played high school tennis I can still see my dad standing at the parking lot, watching the match. He hated double faults. "You're just giving points away. Make your opponent earn them." When I would double fault he would squirm and fidget. And then a finger would come out, just a flash. A second double fault would draw a second finger. Each of those fingers represented a bucket of balls that I would have to serve later that night, to build muscle memory and consistency into the serve. If this is what we do with sports and music and academics, shouldn't it be that way also with the faith?

Sometimes we are criticized for making children learn passages by memory. The word "brainwash" has been used. Is it brainwashing to require children to know the multiplication table cold? Is it brainwashing to make a tennis player to serve a few buckets, a music student to play the scales?

David Lehmann, a professor at New York University requires his students to memorize a Shakespearean sonnet. They complain and groan and struggle. But he defends the practice. "There is no surer way to possess a poem" he says, "than to learn it by heart." Similarly, when you commit a biblical passage to memory, you own that passage. It's yours. It's in your blood. No one can take it away.

One of the folks on my homebound list suffered a stroke which has made communicating a great challenge for her and a major frustration. Yet when we pray the Lord's Prayer, she leads it. She prays the whole prayer. It comes out smoothly and it feels so good for her to do so. Similarly, when I've called on folks who are dying, I'm not always sure they can hear me any longer because they're so far gone or because of heavy sedation. Yet when I read a passage like the 23rd Psalm, so many times I've seen their lips move in synch with the passages. . . not all of it . . . snatches: "The Lord is my Shepherd . . . he leadeth me . . . mercy shall follow me."

In Deuteronomy the Lord says, "*Fix* these words of mine in your hearts and minds . . . Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deut. 11:18).

"When your words came, I ate them. They were my joy and my heart's delight."

If you were only to eat a meal once a month or so, you would eventually starve and die. The Lord says his Word is our real spiritual food. Can we expect our faith to thrive without feeding it? Apparently many in our congregation seem to think so, and frankly, I fear for them.

Someone might say, "Why bother. I can't even remember what the sermon was about two weeks ago?" I can't remember what I ate two weeks ago, but I know I was fed. I know I received nourishment.

Some are looking for their lives to be dramatically changed by worship, and when that doesn't happen, they get discouraged. I don't pretend to think any worship service will lead to any significant or genuine changes. But I do know there is a cumulative effect that does lead to significant and genuine changes, for God's Word does not return to him empty (Is. 55).

"The Word of the Lord came to me and I ate it" said Jeremiah. "Eat this scroll" the Lord said to Ezekiel. "Honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy" he says to us. "Let the

Word of Christ dwell in you richly” Paul wrote. And Jesus said, “Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). Could God have said any of it more clearly than he has said it?

You are what you eat. God’s Word is your spiritual food. His sacraments are your royal jelly. They turn you into an heir of God and no longer a slave. They adjoin you to the Body of Christ. You don’t digest the bread and wine, the body and blood into your substance. It digests you into his. It changes you.

Similarly, God’s Word is not dead, or inert or inactive. It is living and active. It has a way of engraving itself on our hearts, even when we’re not working at it. Just as a craftsman chisels words into stone with very little cooperation from the stone, so the Lord chisels his promises onto our hearts and minds.

The Good News is when God thinks on you, he doesn’t have to pause like I do whenever 8 times 7 rolls around. Mercy is who God is. Grace is instinctive to him. Unconditional love is his very nature. “God is love.” “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103).

Especially now, in this post-Christian culture, increasingly diverse, increasingly hostile to the faith, today especially you need to know what you believe and why. Don’t be casual about feeding on God’s Word, or haphazard, or inconsistent. Let him feed and nurture you regularly. Get his Word into your bloodstream. Own it for yourself.

“When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart’s delight.” Amen.

