

## You Are What You Eat

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-10

There is a lot of disagreement about who first came up with the phrase, "You are what you eat," but there is no disagreement about its truth. The nutrients in the food we eat replace the nutrients we burn in living each day. The vitamins, minerals, proteins, salts and sugars we take into our bodies, they all become a part of us and keep us healthy and alive. On the other hand, when we eat the stuff our bodies don't need, the junk food that may taste good but has little nutritional value, we become something else – unhealthy, overweight, too much fat, too little muscle.

We are what we eat.

But, the food we eat not only determines the health of our bodies, but, even our identities. Think about it. Things that are truly American are considered to be "as American as Mom and apple pie." In fact, every nation's identity includes its food – Italian, German, Chinese, Indian, Mexican, just saying those words brings to mind not only nationalities, but entirely different kinds of food, doesn't it?

It's a part of our identity. We are what we eat.

The same thing is true on a spiritual level.

Did you know that, if you go long enough without eating, you actually stop being hungry? If the hunger signals don't result in getting food, eventually the body gives up and stops sending the hunger signals, even though the body continues to starve, to grow weaker, closer to death.

We see the spiritual equivalent of that in our scripture reading this morning. The people of Israel had been exiled to the nation of Babylon, where they were surrounded by a different culture, a different religion that believed in many gods and worshiped those gods in ways far different from the way Israel had worshiped in Jerusalem. How much the Jews were able to worship Yahweh in Babylon is not known, but they surely did not worship him in Babylon the way they had in the temple in Jerusalem.

Finally, after seventy or so years, the first groups of Jews are allowed to return to the remains of their home, Jerusalem. Its walls were torn down, its temple destroyed. Under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah, the people struggle first simply to rebuild the wall around the city of Jerusalem, to regain a little security from raiding bandits, and to regain a little of their identity in the process. When the city is finally enclosed and the people at least have a home, they ask the priest and scribe, Ezra, to read to them from their scriptures, the Torah, the first five books of our Old Testament.

Everyone listens, men and women, even children old enough to understand, they all listen as Ezra reads from morning till night. And the people begin to weep. It has been so long since they have heard the truths within these words, they have forgotten the goodness of them, the power and energy they provide. They didn't realize how starved they were for God's Word.

You are what you eat on a spiritual level, too, and the truth is, many of us are so starved we hardly know it anymore. Our souls have stopped sending us hunger signals. Others of us have satisfied the cravings of our souls with so much spiritual junk food, we don't feel hungry, but we're not very healthy, either.

Eugene Peterson writes, "There is enormous interest these days in the soul. In the church this interest...is evidenced in a revival of attention in...spiritual direction and spiritual formation. But those who are enthusiastic about this work are...typically disinterested in the Holy Scriptures... It is a matter of urgency that interest in our souls be matched by an interest in our Scriptures... An interest in souls divorced from an interest in Scripture leaves us without a text that shapes those souls."<sup>1</sup>

We are what we eat. Our souls are fed, nourished and formed by what we feed them, and, if we are not feeding them God's Word, then they will try to find nourishment somewhere else.

- They will try to find meaning in a world that says meaning is found in self-fulfillment and self-satisfaction...self-centeredness.
- They will try to find truth in a world where truth depends on what news channel you watch, the spin of the political party you belong to, or, worst yet, what commercials you pay attention to.
- Our souls will try to find happiness in a world that says happiness comes from buying things.

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson, Eugene, Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006, p. 17.

- They will try to find love in a world that says love is just another word for sex.
- They will try to find the definition of beauty from celebrities whose best friend is their plastic surgeon, so that teenage girls think they, too, need a plastic surgeon before they can be considered beautiful.

Our souls will try to find nourishment anywhere they can, and they become what we feed them. Is it a coincidence that the end of Adam and Eve's innocence came from eating something they weren't supposed to?

The prophet Ezekiel was called by God to minister to the people of Israel during the Babylonian Exile, and his call came in the form of a vision. In this breath-taking vision, Ezekiel sees four heavenly creatures, each with four faces, and wings that enabled them to dart about like flashes of lightning. Above them was a throne made of sapphire, gleaming bright. And a voice came from the throne, and God said that he was sending Ezekiel to the people of Israel in Babylon. God presents Ezekiel with a scroll, the very words of God. Ezekiel says, *"He said to me, O mortal, eat what is offered to you; eat this scroll, and go, speak to the house of Israel."*<sup>2</sup> *So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat.*<sup>3</sup> *He said to me, Mortal, eat this scroll that I give you and fill your stomach with it. Then I ate it; and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey.*<sup>4</sup> *He said to me: Mortal, go to the house of Israel and speak my very words to them."*

Amazingly, when John of Patmos was receiving the Book of Revelation, he too had a vision. In his vision, a huge angel appeared. The angel held a scroll in his hand, and the voice of God spoke and said to John, "Go, take the scroll that is open in the hand of the angel." So John goes to the angel who gives John the scroll, the Word of God, and says, "Take it, and eat." And the angel says to John, "You must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

Both of these men are given the message they are to share with the world by eating God's Word, consuming God's message, taking it into themselves in such a complete way that they become what they have eaten and are able then to bring that Word to the people God wants to reach. You see, it is not only for the nourishment of our own souls that we eat this Word, it is for the nourishment of the world, the people we touch every day. We are what we eat. If the only thing we feed our souls is the values of the world, then that is all we have to offer those around us. If we are going to offer them something more, something better, something of true and lasting value, we must eat something better, something of true and lasting value. We must feed our souls the Word of God if we expect to feed it to the world.

When Ezra read God's Word to the people, they wept when they realized how they had been starving and didn't even know it. How about you? Are you starving yourself to the point where you don't even feel hungry anymore? Are you feeding your soul the false values of the world, junk food that takes away the hunger but doesn't nourish you? We are what we eat...and we cannot feed others on that which we haven't fed ourselves.

Like Ezekiel and like John, God has offered us his Word, to nourish and strengthen, to transform us so we can transform this world. Like Ezekiel and John, may we eat this book.

Amen.