

Eat What is Good
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Back in seminary, Sunday nights were usually really fun, and often a high point of the week. Our busy days at work in our different churches would be over. So, if we weren't *too* exhausted—or didn't have other plans—a number of us would gather together to feast. It was a bit of a beggars' banquet really. None of us had too much money, but everybody would bring something to share.

We would all meet in the small, basically two-room apartment that Carol and I shared—along with Sam and Abbey when they visited on vacations. Each of the main rooms was about ten feet square, or maybe eleven. One of the rooms contained our bed, desk, some bookshelves and dressers. The other was stuffed full of the entertainment center, a table, *even more bookshelves*, a sofa, two chairs, and the kids' bunk bed. The kitchen and bathrooms were squished in between the two main rooms.

Now, those rooms were both pretty full to begin with. And then the people would come. We would pack the place, from top to bottom. The living/ dining/ kid's bedroom held at least a dozen on any given night. I think one time there were twenty of us.

Then, all cramped together—wall to wall people—we would start to feast. In a flurry of dishes being passed every which way, and drinks being poured, we would feast. It wasn't much. Just what students could gather. Some wine, some milk maybe. A few veggies and a meat dish, perhaps. It wasn't much. A beggars' banquet. But I tell you truly, we *delighted* ourselves in *rich food* on those days; because it wasn't *just* a meal. When we gathered together we feasted on fellowship and shared experience. We gathered as different people, from different backgrounds and religions to eat what was *good*. There was delicious food, sure. Good company and fun times? Check. But we also feasted on our desire to serve and know God in all our many different ways.

Is it any wonder I thought of those days when I read this morning's passage? The prophet Isaiah is calling his people into a wide and wonderful feast. The Jewish people are invited on behalf of God's steadfast love of David, and their relationships to him. But they are not the only ones who are invited. Other nations are invited, too. Not just one nation, or two—but *all of them*. When the Hebrew Scriptures talk about "the nations," it is a codeword for the whole entire world. And this invitation is not some abstract invitation to countries, but an open invitation to all sorts of specific individuals.

Even the wicked. It says so right there in verses six and seven:

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.¹

Did you hear that last part? God will “abundantly pardon” *all* who return to God. No matter what nation or faith they may come from. Mercy is available for all sorts of folks. That’s good news, right? That reminds us that no matter how far off course we may get to be; no matter how badly we imagine ourselves to be outside the circle of God’s grace; no matter what we may think of ourselves—God is ready to abundantly pardon us. All we have to do is return to God. We have to repent, acknowledge where we have gone astray, and get back with the program. And when we do so, there is rich food waiting for us, and we are invited to eat what is good. We are invited to feast on mercy and love and reconciliation. We are called to ingest forgiveness and pardon.

Of course such an abundant forgiveness implies something that many folks find a little unsettling. Namely, if *we* are forgiven no matter what, then so is everyone we know—even the people that we wouldn’t invite to our own feasts. Because, not just the “in folks” are invited to God’s feast. God even invites those folks who we try hard to like, but never quite manage it. God even invites those people we have no use for at all. And even the people we hate. God wants to gather everyone together, and bring all the outsiders in.

God’s call to the feast reminds us what is truly good. Not just the rich food and fellowship we all enjoy effortlessly, but also the call to mingle with the other—to gather with those outside our class, or race, or sexual orientation, or political inclination. Because when we gather with others who are different from us, we begin to stretch our own boundaries and limitations. And then we help our hearts to grow and embrace former enemies as newly found friends, and fellow beloved children of God. It is through *this* sort of feasting that we come to “understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”² It is through crossing borders and embracing God’s vision of a freely mixing humanity that we truly eat what is good.

Amen?

¹ Isaiah 55:6-7.

² Deuteronomy 8:3b.

Isaiah 55:1-9

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. ⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. ⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; ⁷let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. ⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

"Have you ever gone to visit someone at home and as soon as you sit down in the living room your host offers you something to drink? Your answer may be based not on whether or not you are thirsty but on how long you want to stay. Even if you decline, your host may persist.

"Are you sure?" How about a cup of coffee or a soda?"

"No thank you, I am just fine."

"Not even a glass of water?"

In this passage, Isaiah leans across the coffee table and says, "Hey, stop it. Whether or not you are thirsty, whether or not you are hungry, you need what God has to give."

Isaiah reminds us that a relationship with God based on God's steadfast love for us is our greatest need and the richest nourishment for our lives, but Isaiah's words are not the only offers we hear. We live in the midst of constant promotion. Everywhere we turn we are bombarded with offers and enticements to fill every imaginable want and desire. Even if we do not need anything, it is easy to be convinced we really want something: a new car, a new computer, a glamorous career, a bigger house, a youthful appearance. However the offers are false. They promise to satisfy but turn out to be wasted calories without any nutrition. Any way of life that turns us away from God is a way of life that leads to our starvation and death."

Daniel M. Debevoise Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol 2 p. 78

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