

Hold on to Your Fork

A sermon by Rev. Jackie Clement

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There is an expression of faith in our religious institutions much overlooked and in a modern secular society even, I'm sorry to say, rather maligned. It is the church potluck supper—a celebration of the abundance of creation, an acknowledgement of our role as co-creators. It is a celebration of thankfulness and community and faith.

At the potluck supper there is never any doubt of God's abundance. All will be fed. No one will go away hungry. There will be enough and indeed more than enough for everyone.

At the potluck supper there is never any doubt that a fabulous meal will be served. No one hands out assignments saying I will bring a main dish and you bring a salad and you bring the bread. There is a comfortable reliance that the five food groups and the USDA food pyramid will be as well served as your taste buds. Whatever source of luck and providence and good sense is at work, a full meal results. On those rare occasions when, as once happened at the Woman's Alliance in Littleton, one salad and 22 desserts appear no one really minds. The Goddess of the Potluck has a sense of humor and whimsy. Sometimes you just need pie.

At the potluck supper the finest values of community and compassion are present at the table. Everyone is welcomed as a friend, and everyone participates to whatever level they are able. No offering is scorned. Even that somewhat suspiciously grey casserole will find its fans, and husbands and children the church-through will show allegiance to mom's lasagna with a hearty helping.

At the potluck supper there will be beloved favorite dishes to savor. Having been acclaimed a culinary triumph at the Sunday School picnic in 1968 you can rely on finding Mabel Kearney's baked beans at every gathering. But there will be new dishes to try, too. New experiences await us all at the feast of existence. We may chance only a small helping, but the opportunity is there.

And at every potluck supper the finest moment comes after heaping platefuls have been consumed—that moment known to all veterans of church social halls, that thrill when a murmur ripples through the room: "hold on to your fork." It is then that we all know the best is yet to come. The desserts are about to emerge from the kitchen. Sure, we all know to hold on to our forks or risk missing out, but, lest there be the uninitiated in the room, community supports the common good and the call goes out: "hold on to your fork."

For this is one of the purposes of religious community, to offer periodic reminders of a common tradition, of a shared faith, to remind us lest we forget that the best is yet to

come. And at the same time to remind us that we must be ready for it, we must do our part to bring it about, and we must be worthy of it when it arrives.

Food has been incorporated into religious life in many different ways according to many different customs. There is no mistaking that something so central to human existence has also found a profound role in our spiritual lives through offerings of gratitude and supplication, through fasting and feasting.

Offerings of food to the divine are as old as religion itself recorded on ancient Mesopotamian tablets and in the Vedic scriptures of Hinduism, the earliest of the scriptures still in use. The Greek poet Hesiod wrote of blood sacrifice as an entreaty to the gods that humans be allowed to return to the banquet table after their fall from grace. At the dedication of Solomon's Temple 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep were sacrificed. The grace many of us still say before meals is a remnant of the blessing offered before rituals of sacrifice, a thanksgiving for grace already received and a petition for grace to come.

The Hindu festival of *Annakuta*, still in practice today, is a wonderful example of an ancient religious ritual where food plays the role of mediator to the divine. *Annakuta*, which means "the Mountain of Food," makes the connection between food and eternal life. Over the several days of *Annakuta* a feast is prepared and displayed in the temple. On the feast day pilgrims arrive to witness the offering of the meal to Lord Krishna. When the festival is over the food becomes *prasadam*, "God's leftovers," to be eaten by the devout, each bite a divine communion.

And it is not uncommon to find this connection to feasting following on offering and sacrifice. Sacrifices to the divine in ancient Jewish tradition were offered to the poor or as a salary to the Temple priests. The sacrifice was to the divine, but human need and the virtue of charity were not overlooked.

Feasts were common, and remain so, not only at times of sacrifice but also at times of celebration. It's more than "any excuse for a party" when we celebrate births, bar mitzvahs, weddings and funerals with a gathering around the buffet table. We are saying that this is a moment of importance and meaning, we are saying that we need one another and we need the things that sustain life and make it good. It is an acknowledgment of the goodness and continuity of life.

And in many cultures it has been a reassurance that life continues on even after death. In ancient Egypt the deceased were buried with food to sustain them on their journey. On the Day of the Dead we offer the favorite foods of the ancestors to entice their spirits to return.

Food connects us not only to the living but to the departed and to the divine. Liturgical communion is more than communal sharing of food; it is a memory of sacrifice and a shared tradition that reminds us of our roots and our values. It is the story of a people and

a religion told through food. It is an evocation of the Last Supper, which was itself an evocation of the escape from slavery in Egypt.

The Passover Seder continues to tell the story of the exodus, to hand not only the tradition but respect for the tradition to a new generation. And it does it with food, particular foods with particular meanings prepared in particular ways because never are we to take it for granted. It means something more than dinner, and never are we to take what is sacred to a culture lightly or dismiss it without thought. An essential ingredient in any spiritual meal is mindfulness.

Perhaps no more mindful relationship with food exists than in feasting's opposite of forgoing food through ritual fasting. Another ancient tradition, it continues to be practiced throughout the world by adherents of many religious traditions. In Islam, Muslims observe an entire month fasting from sun up to sun set. Ramadan is essentially a celebration commemorating the giving of the Qur'an, Islam's holy book. It is also a time of deep solemnity for reflecting on personal faithfulness and for considering those who go without food through poverty. The giving of charity is closely linked with foregoing meals, with prayers and with a ritual breaking of the fast after sundown.

We are now in the season of Lent, a time when many Christians fast or forgo some pleasure. In Lent, as in Ramadan, the forgoing of personal pleasure serves as a connection to the very roots of the faith and as a reminder of its obligations. It is a reminder of and a connection to those who do not share in the abundance.

While in our tradition we do not observe Lent or Ramadan as a religious time of fasting, these religious observances can spur us to a time of mindfulness about our own traditions, to our own connection with the sacred, to our own disconnection from those in need. I propose that we take some time to intentionally explore our own spiritual connections, and that we do so through the daily necessity and ritual of food. Take a week if you can, or even a day, where you dedicate each meal you consume, each bite you take, to being connected to your own body, to those you are eating with, to what is about you and beyond you. Eat in mindfulness of the food and its source. Eat in mindfulness of creation and its astounding bounty. Eat in mindfulness of those in your life, those closest to you and those only lightly connected. Eat in mindfulness of the stranger.

Let us take time to make a common everyday act of having a meal an extraordinary act of intention and mindfulness that feeds not only our bodies but our spirit as well. Perhaps add in a blessing or inspirational words before you eat to bring your focus to the table. Read a favorite poem or share a few words about how you feel to be in that moment. Make of a prosaic act a moment of grace and know that even if you are home alone that others are sharing a similar intention in their homes too. Let it bind you to this community in a common act. Let it connect you to the Feast of Existence. Eat as if your very life depended on it. Eat as if your very soul depended on it. See how it feels, and let me know how it goes.

Let's eat as if the best was yet to come, with anticipation of what can be if we work for it, and are ready for it. Hold on to your fork. And enjoy!

Blessed be. Namaste.

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