

FED CHARACTER

--It is said that “you are what you eat.”

That is a belief which has spawned a multi-million dollar industry of this diet and that--high vegetable or high protein, high carb or low carb. On and on it goes, some counting calories or restricting themselves to certain very basic or bland menus, others supplementing natural foods with special vitamins and a whole range of other exotic additives that can be purchased over the counter.

If, on the one hand, one considers the sheer number and variety of restaurants that we offer and, on the other, we consider the number of books, techniques, and organizations or memberships dedicated to diet, we'd probably have to concede that we Americans are fairly obsessed concerning what goes into our mouths.

--All this is not to say, of course, that what we choose to eat is not important. Of course it is. No matter how appealing it may be, a steady diet of cinnamon bagels from Panera Bread is going to take me someplace that I don't really want to go. There are consequences to what we swallow and put into our stomachs; we are the result of what we eat.

While, as that is said, we're no doubt thinking in physical terms, we should recognize that it's just as true and just as important in terms of the inner life. At that inner level, you see, there is an analogous process of ingesting and assimilating--the spiritual equivalent to what has already been said as applying to the physical.

Instead of thinking of fatty foods or “bad” cholesterol, then, consider this:

- Persons who live on a steady diet of soap operas or violent mini-series probably will feel the desire to have a lot more drama in their personal lives, and drama they will get.
- Persons who relish a steady diet of juicy gossip of the latest unsavory tidbits connected to everyone else's life will likely feed their fascination with humanity's underbelly, unwittingly summoning forth all the while their own inferior life.
- Persons who thrive on a steady diet of exercising their abrasive authority, barking out orders, pushing others around, not listening to anything that anyone else has to say, will probably grow dangerously fat with their own sense of self-importance-- a condition that can kill just as decisively as a major heart attack.

By comparison, instead of thinking of a good, healthy garden salad (without the unhealthy dressing, of course), consider:

- Persons who live on a steady diet of great literature and great music probably will simulate the growth of more elevated and refined regions of the psyche.
- Persons whose daily diet begins with a period of devotional reading of one or another of the spiritual classics, followed by a quiet time for contemplation and prayer, will probably feed a very rich awareness of God in their lives.
- Persons who, to the best of their abilities, sink their teeth into ongoing personal practice of the spiritual virtues in their dealings with others will likely experience a deepening of their basic nature in notably

Christly ways.

It's true as well, then, at the emotional and spiritual levels of the personality: What we feed on--i.e., what we take into ourselves and chew on and absorb--directly fashions and casts our very character. We nourish our lowest and or highest possibilities as persons through our daily emotional and spiritual intake: Wholesome "diet" inevitably yields good character; questionable "diet" unavoidably produces bad character.

--This brings us to this morning's reading, where we find Jesus encouraging people to eat him and drink him: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven," he says to his astounded hearers. "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever" (John 6.51). "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life . . . for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink" (6.54-55).

Our contemporary sensitivities are rather appalled by such lines as these. The suggestion of, in effect, gnawing on someone's dismembered finger, or sipping at a puddle of someone's spilled blood, strikes us as being gross and repugnant. Understandably, the imagery has the same reported impact on the Jews who are listening to Jesus' words there in the Capernaum synagogue.

On the surface of it, there's nothing particularly spiritual about an encouragement to participate in what sounds like an invitation to cannibalism--which says that the surface meaning of these verses isn't at all the real meaning.

The way Jesus says what he says is apparently intended to shock and arrest attention. It does that alright! It also clearly demonstrates that, when it comes to Scripture, there are serious limitations and pitfalls leading to the absurd caused by thinking too concretely--as can occur here.

Those who regard his words literally will instinctively recoil at what he says and therefore miss his meaning. Those who hear through his words to something deeper catch his meaning, and that meaning has to do with a certain metaphorical taking of Jesus into themselves--thoughtfully ruminating on his words, carefully savoring his compassionate acts among humanity, purposefully nourishing themselves with his example that increasingly it becomes their own style of being in the world. At this level, a change of diet leads to a change in character.

If we can hear what Jesus is saying behind or beneath what he appears on the surface to be saying, then we can discern a meaning that serves us very well on this Communion occasion, where we have Jesus saying pointedly--and disturbingly--"Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you" (6.53). Definitely, let's not go literal here.

What Jesus is suggesting is this: Persons who are intentional about taking him in, people who are purposeful about bringing him into their daily situations, will experience the emergence of a greater life within them that they didn't know before. To ingest and incorporate the spirit of Christ into one's organic being is to change the organism for the better. That is the "abundance of life" about which Jesus speaks so compellingly. The symbolism is clear then: In order to obtain that life, we must open wide and take him in, willingly, consciously, intentionally--as is so clearly represented in the Communion ritual as we observe it.

--As we prepare to do so, it is important to ask: What sort of character do you observe in yourself?

Objectively speaking, how high or how low, in fact, is it? You probably have a pretty good idea about that.

Your honest answer begs a related question: Well, with what have you been feeding yourself? By what exactly is your character fed?

As obsessed as we seem to be with food at the physical level, we could stand to be a bit more focused and attentive with what, all along, we are consuming at the inner level, don't you think?