

Protagonist Corner

What Did You Feed Them?

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Like most pastors, I run into a lot of people at the hospital. Late last spring I had two juxtaposed conversations, one going on the elevator, one going off. Going on, I ran into a clerical colleague. It was Sunday afternoon, so our exchange automatically drifted to our morning worship services. “I gave them my very best and they’ll never remember it,” was his review of the morning. I understand that depression, and I hear a lot of it in other preachers. Preachers work hard, and they want to see the effectiveness of their work. We hear parishioners talking about the movies they saw, broadcasts that moved them, the new and the best. Even worship is discussed as a designer craft: Is this a “traditional” or a “contemporary” worshipping congregation? Are we “emerging” or “retro”?

After my friend got off at his chosen floor, I spent the rest of my ride wondering what my congregation remembered from that morning’s brilliant sermon. I worship with gracious and encouraging people, many of whom say nice things at the door, but is that even what I want? I do, but I want more. I want to preach in ways that move and amaze, to change lives and to redirect energies. I want to preach in a way that confounds the university crowd I enjoy; I want to preach intellectually acceptable sermons.

Getting off the elevator, I ran into a man I barely know. He works at the hospital as a patient transporter. He can walk fifteen miles a shift, pushing gurneys and wheelchairs all over the medical center. We met last year when he transported a church member and I walked along beside her. He is a devout Christian who has remembered me ever since. He greeted me with “What did you feed them this morning?”

That greeting is his standard hello for the early part of the week. What did I feed them? His greeting has taught me one of a preacher’s most valuable lessons, how to understand the weekly, sometimes daily, task of preaching. My transporter friend is not asking me if I “moved” people or shocked them into new sensibilities. He is asking me how I offered them the gospel to sustain them.

I have eaten many meals throughout my life. A few of them—my first date with my wife, my first meal in a new home, Christmas with my grandmother—I remember. However, most of my previous meals I don’t recollect. But plainly they happened. I am here, sustained and made stronger by each one.

In an older edition of *The Book of Common Prayer*, the Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent applies well to preaching:

Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and *inwardly digest* [emphasis added] them, that by patience and comfort of the holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

To conceive of preaching as offering life-giving, life-sustaining food redirects the preacher's desire to amaze into a holier desire to have it shape and sustain a life in Christ. "You are what you eat" is the constant refrain of all the people who urge us to better nutrition and better living. People starve when not well fed, no matter how much they consume. In our culture of plenty, malnourished people abound, and the poor among us literally starve while others of us worry about diets to slim. The parallels for a preacher in our culture are plain. Preachers are called to serve what will satisfy, nourish, and give ground for strong growth. We offer the Word, and the Word is the basis on which people grow into Christ.

Meals that aren't "remembered" contribute nonetheless to our life. The metaphor of feeding the flock comes not only from Jesus but from our charge at ordination when clergy, almost without regard to tradition or the wording used, vow "to preach the Word of God in the congregation" as a "means of grace."

Some meals are difficult to swallow because they confront us. When I sit down to eat and have a modest meal with items not of my choosing, I am confronted with my own desires to eat all the wrong things, as well as the consequences. On a few occasions, I have even complained to the cook that the meal wasn't to my liking. The bracing news that it's what I need—or must have—can be hard to take. So, too, sermons sometimes serve up what we do not want to swallow. When congregations complain about the offering, the preacher could well answer simply that this is what we need.

My hospital friend's query, "What did you feed them?" bespeaks a need for me as a preacher to recognize how hungry my people are. Throughout my life, I have been blessed with cooks around me who cared enough for me to consider my likes and dislikes, along with what I truly needed. The metaphor of feeding the flock extends even here. Jesus wept over us and preached to us out of love for our needs. As preachers, we are to do the same. If my job is to serve up the Word, to feed the flock, I am responsible to do it in ways that ensure my people can understand and digest that Word. Different meals suit different occasions; different meals suit different people. My friend's question reminds me as the gospel chef to consider to whom I preach. Faced with a variety of tastes in my family, my mother used to vary her offerings. Why should I do any differently as a preacher preparing the Word for a hungry flock?

We identify some foods as comfort foods. Many people devote a substantial amount of time and money reading cookbooks and watching *The Food Network*. The church rightly devotes energy to the incredible contradiction that in the midst of that physical abundance millions are hungry. The metaphor extends into the pulpit.

I understand my colleague's pain that no one remembers what he said that Sunday morning. But I know he's wrong: he's a good preacher who delivers the Word that sustains with love and grace. He needs to meet my other friend, the hospital transporter, who, I suspect would ask him the same question: "What did you feed them?" When my preacher friend reframes his self-analysis into "What did I feed them this morning?" he will grow in his understanding of his work as a pastor who preaches the Word to a hungry flock. He will become more effective at the serving. He will see himself as a host for the Host. And he will be thankful to be invited himself to the Table where he and others feast on the Word, feast on the Lamb, and look for the heavenly banquet to come.