

“Taste and See”

As anyone who is on Facebook knows, it can be a great way to find and keep up with friends. Yet we also know that it subjects us to political diatribes and pictures of cats in silly poses. Recently there are these ridiculous quizzes going around on Facebook. The post shows a selection of twelve foods. In response, we are to select the one that we would do without forever. I have no idea what purpose this serves. It is a sort of negative popularity contest. When the choices are breakfast foods almost inevitably grits loses out. After all, very few are going to give up the other choices such as eggs, bacon, biscuits, and doughnuts. Even if you like grits as I do, it ends up being the least favorite of favorites. To my mind the most absurd of these little quizzes is the one about pie. All pie is good, perhaps with the exception of the Ritz cracker fake apple pie. There is no way I want to give up any pie for the rest of my life.

The selection of scripture readings today is a bit like a pie emporium for me. As I sat down to write I realized there were so many different ways to approach the scriptures. I did not want to have to choose one over the other. In the end it seemed best to me, if you will excuse my turn of phrase, to have my pie and eat it too. Thus we will look at all four of the readings, with a proposed theme lifted from Psalm 34—“Taste and see that the Lord is good, happy are they who trust in him.”¹

We begin with the passage from First Kings. This passage starts in the middle of a story and thus seems plucked out of thin air. The context involves the prophet Elijah who has just finished doing battle with the King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and their court prophets. (Remember from our study of Amos that there are God-chosen prophets in this case Elijah, and professional sycophantic prophets, in this case the hoard that work for Ahab and Jezebel). The battle concerned whose god was greatest. Is it Baal whom Jezebel worships or is it YHWH² the God of Israel and Elijah? We know that YHWH is the true god of all but it takes a battle of prophets to prove this and to destroy the prophets of the false god Baal.

After the battle Elijah, who is exhausted, flees the wrath of Jezebel who has sworn to kill him. He is in the barren wilderness and just wants to die. But the Lord sends an angel to tend to him, feed him, give him rest, and lead him to safety. Elijah may be overwhelmed by the struggle against Jezebel and Ahab, yet, God does not forsake him. God tends to his bodily needs and shows Elijah (whose name means my God is YHWH) a way forward. Elijah has tasted the word of God and also the bread that God has supplied. He may be tired but he knows that the Lord is good, and he continues to serve God in spite of the trials he faces.

The portion of Psalm 34 we read is one of thanksgiving and rejoicing. It is a psalm that might have been written in response to Elijah’s situation. Elijah had been praising God continually. That praising however landed him in this predicament where he is at odds with the king and queen of Israel. His praise of God meant that he also had to proclaim and defend God in the face of the monarchs’ opposition. When his work on God’s behalf made him a fugitive who was ready to give up his life in despair, God answered him and delivered him from all his troubles, just as the psalm says. The angel of Lord encompassed him and delivered him. The psalmist affirms what Elijah knew, “that the Lord is good.”

¹ Psalm 34:8 NRSV

² The Tetragrammaton YHWH is usually rendered Yahweh to add vowel sounds for pronunciation.

The selection from the letter of Paul to the Ephesians is, at first blush, the reading that seems out of sync with the others. If Paul's admonitions are any indication the church in Ephesus was quite troubled. It is not often in scripture that Paul or anyone tells a congregation that they need to stop stealing. Was the church in Ephesus full of criminals? Were those who were admonishing the thieves so heated that their anger was ready to tear the church apart? I know of troubled congregations but this one takes the cake or the pie.

Yet after Paul points out their various struggles and failings from anger, to thievery, to bitterness, to malice, he reminds them to "be imitators of God." Then he offers a phrase we often here in our worship services when he writes, "live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." It is his way of reminding the Ephesians to "taste and see that the Lord is good."

The Gospel lesson is an extension of the one we heard last week. Indeed it begins with a verse from last week's reading where Jesus says, "I am the bread of life." Jesus is pointing out that his flesh is the bread of life. It is not just the bread that sustains us as the bread sustained Elijah or the Hebrews in their wilderness sojourns. The bread that is the flesh of Jesus is bread that gives life. Without this bread there is no life. Without this bread life is a pale imitation of life. It is a life of grasping hoping for something real, fulfilling, and healing. But that life always comes up short because possessions, money, power or anything else the secular world offers is hollow. It may sparkle for a moment but soon it loses its luster. Then our eyes start searching for something new with more sparkle which is also destined to fade.

While the bread we receive at the altar may seem to be a pale imitation of bread, once it is blessed and broken it is like the body of Christ that was blessed and broken on the cross. It is the true bread that blesses our broken hearts and lives. It is the bread that nourishes our soul beyond anything else we eat. It is the bread that makes life worth living despite the hardships we face. It heals our anger and bitterness and allows us to live and love in community as Paul exhorted the Ephesians to do. It is the bread that, unlike the manna from heaven which filled their bellies for a day, fills up our hearts for life eternal. Indeed, it is the earthly symbol of the heavenly feast that never ends.

Most remarkable of all, you and I, despite our Elijah-like exhaustion, our Ephesian-like failings, and the many distractions that life throws in our way, are invited to this feast. We are invited to take the body of Christ blessed and broken into ourselves at this humble altar. So do it. "Taste and see that the Lord is good." Trust in God and you will be filled with joy, now and forever.