

# You Are What You Eat

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John 6:53

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*Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. (John 6:53)*

What a strange saying; no wonder the disciples had a hard time with it. Whenever I read a text, I generally spend some time letting my mind wander before doing any actual study of it, and sometimes my mind goes in strange directions. When I read this passage, it took me back 10 or 12 years to one of my favorite brushes with fame, when I met Grandpa Jones in Nashville and got to talk with him for a few minutes. Anybody here watch *Hee Haw* back in the day, and remember Grandpa Jones? My favorite sketch of his had him washing a window, and the crowd yells, *Hey Grandpa, what's for supper?* He stops the window washing long enough to give them a preview of some pretty strange sounding food, such as *Flapjacks fried in bacon drippin's, raccoon ribs with collard clippin's, fried mush and swamp cabbage stew and corn cob jelly fresh made for you.* To which the crowd replies with a hearty, *Yum, yum!*

And then I got to thinking about some of my strange eating habits as a kid. My mom was the best cook in the neighborhood, probably

in town. Every day she laid out a homemade-from-scratch spread that would constitute a veritable feast, meats and vegetables and casseroles and breads and cakes and pies to make your mouth water. But when I was 7 or 8 or 9, I would go on these binges for weeks at a time where I only wanted one food, and it usually was not a good home-made dish. I was way ahead of my time with my *mono-diet* fad. One time I was on a ham and cheese loaf sandwich on white bread with the crusts cut off kick. Another time it was Mrs. Paul's fish sticks, fresh out of the freezer. After a while, a month or six weeks, I'd get my fill; I'd get fondered and fed up with that particular food and move on to the next. My grandmother, who lived with us, gave me heck for eating such junk while turning up my nose at the good food on the table. Granny could be a saucy old mountain woman when she wanted to be, and she'd say something like—*Keep on eating that frozen malarky, boy. First thing you know, you're gonna turn into a fish stick.* Or, *Keep on eatin' that store bought malarky, boy. First thing you know you're gonna turn into a ham and cheese loaf.* She was probably right. After all, you are what you eat.

After my mind rambled for a while, I came back to the text. Two thousand years ago, in the 30s, 40s, and 50s of the first century, people in Palestine were fed up with Roman rule; they had a belly full of occupation and were looking for some different spiritual/cultural cuisine. There was a veritable cafeteria of options for them, as different movements battled for the hearts and minds and appetites of the people. Each movement in that revolutionary period represented a different body being served up to satisfy those hungers and appetites. Not a body in the way we think of it—flesh and blood, but a body politic, body of knowledge, body of work, body of evidence. We read about several of these movements, these bodies, in the New Testament.

One such movement offered up the body politic of morality, a body of work defined by legalism. *Eat this body.* If we can just keep the law, all of it, God will take the Roman boot off our neck. *Eat this body.* Some people did eat it up and went on a morality binge. I can just hear somebody's saucy old grandmother saying, *You keep on swallowing that line of legalistic malarky, you're gonna turn into a Pharisee.* You are what you eat.

Another movement offered up the body politic of complicity, a body of work defined by pragmatism. *Eat this body.* If we just work our way up from the inside, we'll be able to get the Roman boot off our neck. *Eat this body.* Some people did eat it up and went on a complicity binge. I can just hear somebody's saucy old grandmother saying, *You keep on swallowing that line of pragmatic malarky, you're gonna turn into a Sadducee.* You are what you eat.

Yet another movement we read about offered up the body politic of terrorism, a body of work defined by militaristic violence. *Eat this body*. The only way to get the Roman boot off our neck is with a good old fashion sword through the belly. *Eat this body*. Some people did eat is up and went on a terrorism binge. I can just hear somebody's saucy old grandmother saying, *You keep on swallowing that line of militaristic malarky, you're gonna turn into a Zealot*. You are what you eat.

Each of these movements had its own body politic it was hoping the people would swallow, its own body of knowledge it hoped the people would absorb, its own body of work it hoped the people would consume, its own body of evidence it hoped the people would devour. *Eat this body—Eat this body*. In each case, some people did, and became part of the movement. You are what you eat.

And along came Jesus, with yet another alternative—*Eat my flesh. Eat this body*. In light of the fierce competition for satisfying the appetites and hungers of the people, we can begin to understand what he was saying. *Absorb this other kind of body politic*—join the beloved community; *devour this body of knowledge*—know the truth, *chew on this body of evidence*—experience Emmanuel, God With Us, *swallow this body of work* - engage in the works of grace, mercy, healing.

*Eat this body.*

Partake of peace, gobble up grace, wolf down welcome. Polish it off, put it away, chow down and scarf up this body of the beloved community. The early church, as we read in the first chapters of Acts, really did eat up the idea of a beloved community and went on a serious Jesus binge. I can just hear somebody's saucy old grandmother saying, *You keep on swallowing that line of love and peace and grace, you're gonna turn into the body of Christ*. You are what you eat.

Roughly 1800 years after that revolutionary period in first century Palestine, another revolutionary spirit was spreading around the world. It was around 150 years ago when the newspaper in the Cuban city of Matanzas, called the *Aurora*, began documenting the daily battles for the hearts and minds and appetites of people in the the lead up to Cuba's first revolution and the Ten Year War. I began reading a history of Matanzas while in Cuba, really a history of the world through the lens of Matanzas, much of it taken from the pages of this newspaper. The *Aurora* was not only writing about events in Cuba; it was also writing about America's looming second revolution, the war between the States, as well as the French-inspired revolutions spreading through Europe, feeding the people with a body politic whose slogan was *liberty, equality, fraternity*.

When I think about the different daily fare the cultures of Cuba and the US offers its people now, I am reminded of the very different tracks the two countries took in their revolutionary history from the time the *Aurora* documented their respective histories. Cuba and the US took very different approaches in their revolutions. Instead of the balanced French diet of liberty, equality, and fraternity, we in the US have been binging on liberty, feeding almost exclusively at the trough of untethered freedom. Cuba has also foregone the balanced diet, but they have been feeding almost exclusively at the trough of orchestrated equality for the last 50 years.

What I learned as a child with my mono-diet, I have learned in my spiritual life as an adult: restricting your diet to eating one dish over and over is bad for the health. Many Cubans, especially the extremely discontent younger generation, now have a gag reflex to what has been offered them for fifty years, this steady diet of a highly engineered egalitarian body politic. The next generation is sick of being force fed equality; they exhibit signs of spiritual food poisoning in their desperate attempts to escape the country.

***"Hey Circle, what's for supper? Mercy for the main dish, with generous sides of compassion casserole, grilled grace, forgiveness fricassee, hope on the half shell, and joy jambalaya. Top it all off with some shalom sherbet and wash it down with the vintage vino of nonviolence. Yum yum! Come and get it! Al atake! Buen provecho."***

The Cubans aren't the only ones. It occurred to me, as I experienced the re-entry shock of coming back into the land of plenty after three weeks there, that the US culture is demonstrating a different kind of gag reflex to our mono-cultural offering of freedom as the only item on the menu. Whereas the Cubans are battling to escape a deteriorating society, many here are battling to escape a deteriorating capacity for personal mental health. When I returned to US, after reading a history of Matanzas from the pages of the *Aurora* 150 years ago, I immediately heard the news of another Aurora—the Colorado city where the young man went on the shooting spree at the Batman movie. Then I returned home to hear about challenge after challenge confronting some of the young people I love and know best in my life, serious and heartbreaking challenges to mental and emotional health. It appears to me that our next generation, like the younger generation of Cubans, is also exhibiting signs of spiritual food poisoning. Our young people are spiritually and emotionally gagging from a body politic that offers nothing but a steady diet of personal freedom and endless choice. It is isolating and destructive to the human spirit. Confronting the challenges of these young people put me in touch with my own struggles and challenges related to mental and spiritual health, my own signs of spiritual food poisoning from being force fed an unlimited supply of untethered freedom.

I am convinced that neither a mono-diet of equality nor a mono-diet of liberty provides us with an experience of fraternity, the beloved community, the third menu item in the French revolution's cuisine. And yet, somehow, in the interchanges I have had both in traveling to Cuba, and in hosting Cubans here, I have experienced true community, something my soul has longed and hungered for for many years. More than one person on our trip this summer commented to me how much more alive I seemed there, how much healthier I seemed. And I have heard my Cuban family say the same thing about themselves, that they come alive and feel healthier when together with their American family. Somehow, we both are able to find a deeper and truer sense of community together than we can in our respective separate cultures. I have come to believe that what happens when we're together is this: in some mysterious way the daily fare we are each force fed is pushed aside, and the body of Christ is suddenly visible on the table, ready to be consumed. Or a better image—the layers of cultural trappings that so often surround our understanding of church and faith are cut away, and we are more able to see and taste and experience the body and blood of Christ for what it is.

Have you ever eaten a really cheap brand of chicken nugget, so heavy on the batter and breading that you really can't distinguish what's inside? That's how church in America is to me a lot of the time. Isolated from the rest of the world, even our church experience is so enmeshed with the culture, it's hard to know what Jesus really tastes like; it's hard to know the consistency of Christ, what this alternative body politic feels like in your mouth. It's so hard to get through the cultural overlay—it's like eating a thickly battered and breaded nugget of Jesus, and generally the taste of fried batter overwhelms the nugget inside. Presumptions of privilege are so strong, it's hard to be church without them.

But in partnership, over the years of building relationships of trust, we are able to carve away the culture, and taste the body anew. I don't want to insinuate that cultivating long-term relationships with Cubans is the only way to clear the table in order for the body politic of Jesus to be visible and present and ready for consumption. It is one way. I invite you to consider what you can do to clear away the cultural fare, the thickly battered breading that so often covers up Jesus, so that you can really taste and chew on and swallow this radically new body politic called the beloved community.

I've been listening to a lot of Rolling Stones lately, and one of my favorite songs is *Let It Bleed*. I can just hear Jesus singing that song to his followers as they gathered around the table, with the various revolutionary movements swirling around them. *We all need someone we can feed on, and if you want it, you can feed on me. Yes we all need someone we can feed on, and if you want it, you can feed on me.*

Feed on Jesus. Do what you have to do to cleanse your palate of our cultural fare, and feed on a radically different body politic. Gobble it up, wolf it down, polish it off, put it away. And give thanks, for God is great, God is good, let us be thankful for this food. Amen.

Benediction: Hey Circle, what's for supper? Mercy for the main dish, with generous sides of compassion casserole, grilled grace, forgiveness fricassee, hope on the half shell, and joy jambalaya. Top it all off with some shalom sherbet and wash it down with the vintage vino of nonviolence. *Yum yum!* Come and get it! Al atake! Buen provecho.