

*A Taste of Heaven*

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John 6.51-58

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*Down by the riverside* ... With a hundred pounds of salmon ready to go on the grill outside, there may be some of you with alternative words to this old spiritual this morning: *not* “I’m gonnalay down my sword and shield” but “I’m gonnapick up my fishing pole, down by the riverside.”

How many of you are fisher-folk?

I’m not. I blame my dad for that. My dad always claimed he could go out with the world’s greatest fishermen and, if he was in the boat, no one would catch anything. Apparently, he proved this claim sufficiently enough that we just stopped being invited to go along.

So I was left with my imagination about the world of fishing. I imagined families leaving behind the cares of the world to go down to the river or out on the water to commune with nature and with each other and with that hope of a great fish.

And there were the stories – also products of imagination as far as I could tell – of the really big one that got away or the one that was reeled in only after heroic struggle and masterful skill.

I understood that you had to be quiet when you were fishing so I imagined it to be the perfect introvert sport.

But I didn’t go. And I didn’t have stories to tell. And all I did have was this almost mystical imagination about what happened when people went fishing.

It didn’t help matters that two pastors I consider to be pretty cool– one an American Baptist and the other United Methodist -- claimed that fishing was the ultimate spiritual practice.

Having moved to the Northwest almost 20 years ago, I am discovering that what I imagined about fish and fishing really does have a sacred quality to it.

The creation stories of the Native American communities in this part of the world are about fishing and salmon and eating together.

The Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission tells the tribal legend about the Creator preparing to bring human beings into the world. The Creator knew that these humans would need a lot of help to survive and called a great council of all creation. The first to promise to help was Salmon, “who offered his body to feed the people.” The second was Water to be a home for Salmon. And because of this sacrifice, the ceremonies throughout the region “always begin with a blessing on and the drinking of water, followed by a prayer of thanksgiving” for and sharing of salmon.

In these ceremonies, the Commission says, while you can smell the aroma of cooking fish, what “you’ll probably be struck by [is] how much reverence is paid to the fish” because it is in these songs and stories and taking salmon into themselves that the Native peoples know who they are and that they belong to this place. “Whether they realize it or not,” the tribes say, if you live in the Northwest, “we are all Salmon People.”

And even when days are tough and challenges are great – and the environmental challenges are almost overwhelming –the Native peoples have looked to the return of salmon as a sign of hope.

Whether fisher-folk or not, a “salmon bake,” as we are having today, isn’t just about sharing food. In this part of the world it’s something sacred.

It’s about reverence for the world in which we live.

It’s less about consuming

and more about communing with that world and with each other.

It’s about belonging to this place.

It’s about who we are.

And it’s about struggle and hope and finding your way home.

I keep going back to the work of Scott Russell Sanders about how important it is for our spiritual lives to cultivate a sense of belonging in this highly mobile, technological world. A sense of belonging has everything to do with how we know who we are.

Food has always had a role in this. For some of you, it’s the taste of fried chicken or dahl or latkes or jello salad. For me, it’s the mincemeat pie I shared with my dad every holiday.

What we eat has at least something to do with who we are.

Now it's in that context that I want to read the text from John 6.51-58 today. Frankly, I find this a disturbing passage without some background for these words attributed to Jesus by a community nearly a century after his death – a community dealing with the death of Jesus and the fact that he hadn't returned as he promised; a community still reeling from the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple so that all their familiar spiritual reference points had been obliterated; a community where the only thing left to hold on to is this practice of eating together and telling stories and imagining what hope there might be for the world.

Perhaps they found themselves then in a place not too far from where our Native American sisters and brothers find themselves now – trying to hold to what it means to be and to belong in a world that is so quickly slipping away.

Okay, so here's John 6.51-58 from the *Inclusive Bible*:

Jesus said, "I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. If any eat this bread, they will live forever; the bread I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." [Reminiscent of Salmon in the Native creation story.]

The religious authorities then began to argue with one another. "How can he give us his flesh to eat?"

Jesus replied, "The truth is, if you don't eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Chosen One, you won't have life in you. Those who do eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Everyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me, and I live in them.

Just as the living God sent me and I have life because of God, so those who feed on me will have life because of me.

This is the bread that came down from heaven. It's not the kind of bread your ancestors ate, for they died; whoever eats this kind of bread will live forever."

That Native creation story is helpful to me here because that second century Jesus community was struggling with its identity and its hope. And those times when they gathered to eat together weren't just about food. Those were sacred times when they were reminded of their identity as 'Jesus people.'

You may be tired and disappointed, the gospel writer seems to be saying, but when you come together to sing and tell those stories and eat together, you are feeding on something that can remind you of who you are and where you belong.

That bread can raise you up  
and resurrect your hope  
and help you imagine your way  
into the world you have been looking for.

When you share this bread together, you are getting a taste of heaven.

Rachel Held Evans, the author who was here last year as part of the Romney Lectures, has written a new book *Searching for Sunday*. She wrote it out of her own disappointment with her evangelical past and the disillusion of a dream to create a new kind of faith community in her hometown. She felt like “a religious orphan” she says.

But while she was on a book tour she discovered communities that, she said, “welcomed me, supported me, listened to me, and, of course, fed me.”

She had barbecue with the Methodists in Tennessee and hot dogs with the Dutch Reformed in Michigan; she had homemade bread with the Quakers of Portland and macaroni and cheese with the Mennonites of Harrisonburg; she ate roasted chicken and mashed potatoes with the Dominican nuns of Sienna Heights and Adam Brothers homemade chicken noodle soup with the Free Methodists of Greenville, Illinois.

And, in Seattle, she writes, “Pastor Tim and his husband Patrick served up fresh salmon with avocado mango salsa, asparagus, quinoa, and local red wine.”

There it is, I finally get mentioned in a best-selling book and it’s not about some sermon I preached or some article I wrote. It’s food – food that I didn’t even cook. That’s all Patrick. And it’s a testimony to his cooking that she can remember every detail of that meal.

I’d like to think that I had something to do with it – that the conversation was so stimulating that it raised her out of her orphan-hood and resurrected her hope of belonging; something that reaffirmed her identity as a child of God; something that would give her a taste of that world she is trying to imagine.

Because that’s the kind of thing that can happen when you share a meal together, especially when what you are sharing is salmon and local wine ... and, most importantly, yourself. All the Salmon People know that.

“I dined with rocket scientists and musicians, Bible scholars and activists, rabbis and priests, monks and nuns, the homeless and the wealthy,” Rachel writes [and] “on days when I am hungry – for community, for peace, for belief – I remember what it was like to feed people Jesus, and for people to feed Jesus to me.”

Well, there you have it. On days when you are hungry for belonging and hope, there is a taste of heaven waiting for you, whoever you are and wherever you are.

It’s hard to know what this world is coming to. But our tradition imagines the world’s biggest banquet table where everyone shares the gifts of life.

We get a taste of that, Rachel says, every time we “eat fruit in season and drink coffee that’s fairly traded so that Latin farmers can join us at the table with their heads held high ...” when we “share the reputation of Jesus and dine with those the religious love to hate – gays and lesbians, divorcees, single moms, junkies, dreamers and doubters ...” when we “squeeze a little tighter to make enough room for people of all political persuasions, all religious backgrounds, all ethnicities and all denominations ...” when we “eat a little less so that everyone has enough, and linger longer so that everyone gets a chance to share what’s on their mind.”

When that happens, we get a little taste of heaven.

So the salmon that’s waiting for us isn’t just food. It’s something sacred.

It’s about reverence for the world in which we live.

It’s less about consuming

and more about communing with that world and with each other.

It’s about belonging to this place.

It’s about who we are.

It’s about struggle and hope and finding your way home.

It’s a little taste of heaven.

And, today, if you hear that voice that says, “Come and get it!” do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

“We are all Salmon People” can be found online at [www.critfc.org](http://www.critfc.org). Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (Beacon Press, 1993). Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: loving, leaving, and finding the church* (Nelson Books, 2015), p.134ff. Rachel’s article, “Bigger Banquet Tables,” appears in *Letters To A Future Church* (Intervarsity Press, 2012), pp.140-143.