

Eating at the King's Table
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Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you." Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. -- Daniel 1:3-17, NIV

This past week I read a newspaper article about David Zabriskie, an American cyclist getting ready to compete in the Tour de France. It is generally regarded as the most difficult bike race in the world. What makes Zabriskie unusual is that he is attempting to do this as a vegan. If you don't know what that is, a vegan is someone who does not eat meat, dairy or eggs. Cyclists in that race can burn up to 8,000 calories per day. Some of those competing have a hard time taking in enough calories to keep going. Conventional wisdom says that you need plenty of meat and dairy products to help supply the protein that enables the muscles to recover. But Zabriskie is planning on doing it without all of that, save a few ounces of salmon two days a week to increase iron intake. (From *The Wall Street Journal*, "Riding the Tour De Vegetable", Wednesday, June 29, 2001, D6) But what makes him unique is what he plans to eat. That is his claim to fame. What he eats (or doesn't eat) defines who he is – the vegan cyclist. In some ways the same was true in the time of Daniel – what he chose to eat, or not eat, became a statement about who he was and Whose he was.

Now most of us know that meals can be important symbols. Think about this weekend and our plans for tomorrow – the Fourth of July. Most of us will probably have some kind of cookout to celebrate the birth of this nation. Over the years hot dogs and hamburgers have become the

kinds of things we will eat. In fact it is something common to many important events that we celebrate them with some kind of special meal – whether it be Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, or even significant events in our spiritual lives like Confirmation in which we have a breakfast here at the church, and then many families go out for lunch afterwards. Having a meal to celebrate or acknowledge the importance of an event is something we all know about.

And at the meal we may have symbolic food like a birthday cake for a birthday or turkey for Thanksgiving. These foods have come to symbolize or point to something beyond them. They say that this is more than just a cake; this is about the celebration of a life. This is more than just a turkey; this is about giving thanks to God for all that we have. This weekend as much as any weekend in the life of our nation, we are surrounded by symbols that remind us of what is good about our nation. They invite us to remember those who made great sacrifices to found this nation more than two hundred years ago. So the flags and fireworks not only invite us to remember; these symbols reinforce our identity as they remind us of who we are as Americans.

Our story today about Daniel is also about symbols that seek to define who we are. Daniel is living in a time when the people of Israel have been conquered and sent into exile in Babylon. The king has selected some of the “best and brightest” from among the captives and chosen them to be educated in Babylonian ways. The king probably had a plan for these bright young men – to use them in some way. The king tells his chief court official, Ashpenaz, to select these young men. Among them were Daniel and his three friends. The first thing the chief official did was to give them new Babylonian names as a way of showing them who was in charge. It was also a way of saying that we now define your identity.

The second thing the king wanted them to do was to eat the food from the king's table which was very rich – wine and meat. Most captives would have said, “Great!” but Daniel and his friends did not. There is some scholarly debate about why they did not eat the food and there is not one obvious reason why they did not. Some modern day vegetarians want to make this passage about eating your vegetables, but in spite of the obvious benefits of eating vegetables, that is probably not the reason Daniel resists. One person has said that not eating the king's food was probably the only method of resistance left to Daniel and his friends. They had already been assigned new names. So Daniel and his friends asked if they could eat only vegetables and water, rather than the food from the king's table.

Now it tells us in the scripture that the chief official had been influenced by God to show compassion to Daniel and his friends, but when it came to disobeying the king's order about what food they should eat, he says that it could cost him his head, and he wasn't willing to do that. So Daniel asks the guard appointed by the chief official, and he is willing to try a ten day test to see if they can tell any difference. Can you imagine the courage it took to do that? The chief official was afraid of losing his head over this, and the guard is below him in authority. So what would they do to him if the king found out?

Now we don't even know the guard's name, but he is one of those unnamed persons in the Bible who does something amazing. The Bible is full of these unnamed persons who stand up at just the right time and do something that begins a sequence of events that change everything. Think of the little boy with the loaves and fishes, or the Roman soldier at the foot of the cross who says, “Truly, this is the son of God.” Those are the people I want to meet when I get to heaven – these unnamed heroes who have the courage to step up and make a difference.

Daniel and his friends eat water and vegetables for ten days. In the end they are healthier than all the others in the “test groups,” so then everyone gets water and vegetables. Finally, it tells us that these young men were blessed by God with knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. Daniel was even able to understand dreams and visions. Because they chose not to eat the king’s food from the king’s table, but to stay faithful to what they knew God wanted them to do, God blessed them in the end – even while they were captives in a foreign country.

In a sense, Daniel had the option of eating at a king’s table, but he chose not to do it because of what it symbolized. Daniel could not do much, but his symbolic action of choosing not to eat this “other king’s” food may have said something about whom he believed to be the ultimate “king” in his life. Whose table Daniel ate from made a difference.

If we fast forward to the New Testament, we will find lots of stories, particularly in the gospels, which are focused on meals. Within that first century of Jewish culture, there were a number of rules not only about how the food must be prepared, but with whom the righteous person was supposed to eat. And then along comes Jesus, this rabbi from a small town who seems to ignore most of the rules about eating. And it makes those who are the keepers of the rules very angry, to the point that they say things about Jesus like, “He is a glutton and a drunkard.” But more than that, instead of eating with the morally “pure” persons, Jesus chooses to eat with the outcasts – the sinners – those whom no true rabbi in his right mind would choose to eat with. And every time he did that it symbolized that God was seeking to save broken people like you and me. Some even said that Jesus was crucified because he ate with the wrong kinds of people. But this Jesus goes on to share meal after meal. And ultimately he shares the meal we call the Last Supper -- which we are celebrating today. It was a meal filled with all sorts of symbolism, not only from the Jewish Passover, but in celebration and anticipation of the new kingdom that Jesus would usher in with his death and resurrection. This Jewish rabbi, who was also the king of kings, invited his disciples to eat at the real king’s table. And when we eat that food, it says something about who we are and Whose we are: We are followers of Jesus Christ and we belong to him as the true king who is above all other kings.

I believe that today, like in the time of Daniel, we are often tempted to eat at other tables. And if what we eat says something about who we are, then it is something we may need to think about. What do our meals say about us and our identity? Think about it. Lots of us eat lots of fast food – I know I do. What does that say about us? Maybe that we are so busy that we want life in nice, neat little packages that we can eat in between doing other things. We don’t really care about the nutritional value, we just want it to taste good and be quick – even if it kills us eventually.

Or, maybe we prefer the power lunch. We like good food with the right people in the right places as a symbol that we have arrived. We want to eat only at the finest restaurants that serve only people like us. Or, maybe we are the “All-You-Can-Eat Buffet” kind of folks who look at life and say, "Bring it on and lots of it!" We just need more and more and more. Or, maybe we are the disciplined salad and diet kind of person who considers everything we eat in order to stay healthy, and to look good, too. Maybe our meals do say something about who we are and we need to think about that.

On this communion Sunday that happens fall on the Fourth of July weekend; I want to invite us to think about what it means to eat at the king's table. Daniel showed us what it means to choose not to give into the "food" of the culture, particularly when there are strings attached. Daniel chose not to eat the king's food at the king's table because he knew that it could eventually mean giving up his loyalty to God who was his true king. He knew, like the Psalmist would write, "The LORD is king forever and ever." (Psalm 10:16, NRSV)

Today, I think we are often tempted to eat the food from other tables. Some meals may be at tables that invite us to live lifestyles that are, in the end, selfish and self-destructive. Other tables invite us to put something or someone else in the place of God. In eating at that table we may find ourselves compromising, bit by bit, in ways that go against being a follower of Christ. But when we eat at the table of the true king, it then helps to put all of the other things in life in their place. Sometimes the things that we choose to put in the place of God are not bad. They may be good. In fact, it is usually something good that we try to raise to the highest level in our lives -- but that is not where it belongs. For example, love of our country or love of our family -- these are good things. They have their place. But when they become the most important thing in our lives, then we have "missed the mark." Keeping God as the ultimate king of our lives reflects the way God intended it to be. And *when God is first, then everything else in life is more likely to find its rightful place.*

So this morning come to the table of the "true" king -- the king of kings, the Lord of Lords -- who gave his life for you and me, so that we might experience life in all of its fullness -- both here and now, and when we gather one day around the table in heaven for that great banquet.

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.