



Texts in Context

When Scripture Speaks out of Both Sides of Its Mouth: Dueling Preachers on a Faithful Food Ethic

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Last semester I taught a seminary course entitled, “Preaching Public Issues.” Since I was aware that the conversation about the ethics of food was gaining traction in both secular and ecclesial circles, the first unit in the course was focused on this issue. The result was a much-needed conversation on a seminary campus and twelve faithful and creative sermons. The variety was enlightening. One student explored the ethics of eating meat through Gen 1:26–31 and Acts 10. Another connected Mark’s account of Jesus calling Levi the tax collector and the complications of the governmental Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as the Food Stamp Program). Luke 10:30–37 served as the foundation for both a sermon focused on the global concern of clean water and one on the Farm Bill. Have you ever interpreted the “bread of life” texts in John 6 through the lens of your community’s local food deserts?¹ I had not until a student did so in her sermon. The result was a conversation about starting a seminary community garden. She claimed, “When we hear the ‘bread of life’ passage that I read a few minutes ago, we generally do not think first about food deserts. But food that nourishes and

¹Food deserts are defined as low-income areas in which a large percentage of the population lives more than one mile from the nearest large grocery store.

So which is it? Do we, with Scripture, enjoy the abundance God has provided? Or do we, with Scripture, practice care for those who suffer hunger? Before we get to a too-easy “both,” we should think more deeply and theologically about the implications of each.

sustains life (and *life to the fullest*)—the Bread of Life—is precisely what these ‘food deserts’ lack.”²

The most striking discovery in this unit was the prevalence of two seemingly conflicting scriptural proclamations: (1) being faithful means enjoying the abundance God has provided, and (2) being faithful means consumption that is mindful of neighbors who suffer from hunger as a result of the unequal distribution of this abundance. Which is it? Both, we all discovered. By the end of the unit, we were palpably aware that the relationship between Christian daily life and food is complex. Yes, there is always someone hungrier than we are, and, yes, there is always someone better off than we are, and, yes, we need the Holy Spirit’s guiding influence in order to proceed faithfully.

THE CONTEXT

The context under consideration here is a seminary community, Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary (LTSS), situated in the Eau Claire neighborhood in South Carolina’s capital city of Columbia (Richland County). Students in our seminary are probably like other seminary students in that they find it difficult to adjust to their newfound economic status. Because the majority of seminary students have quit their jobs to come to seminary, they move from being earners to spenders. They can no longer spend \$35 per entrée, not even once a week. Rather than chipping away at undergraduate debt, the seminary student is incurring more educational debt; many are relying on that next loan from either the federal government or a generous donor. The day-to-day change in reality makes it difficult for the seminary student to remember that access to education is a luxury. Indeed, access to money (whether as a result of one’s own earning potential or the earning potential of a donor or the federal government) is a privilege. But it’s a confusing privilege when one is making adjustments to the way the family is fed. To add to the confusion, our seminary, generally recognized as a source for social service projects, recently opened its own food pantry for the seminary community.

This is complicated even further when one considers the context in which LTSS is located. First, while the statistic that one-fourth of the residents in Richland County live below the poverty line is grim enough, consider that nearly one-third of the residents in the Eau Claire neighborhood live below the poverty line.³ According to United States Department of Agriculture studies, about 9,000 people in the Eau Claire neighborhood alone are classified as having “low access” to fresh, healthy foods.⁴ That is about 7% of the population of *all*

²Thank you for your insights, Cara Morgan. Her work is used with permission.

³“Eau Claire neighborhood in Columbia, South Carolina (SC), 29203 detailed profile,” *City-Data.com*, at <http://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Eau-Claire-Columbia-SC.html#ixzz2UQkCsqZX> (accessed July 19, 2013).

⁴Thank you again to student Cara Morgan for the information in the remainder of this paragraph. For an interactive atlas provided by the USDA (and to check statistics in your area), see “Food Access Research Atlas,” *United States Department of Agriculture*, at <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-desert-locator/go-to-the-locator.aspx> (accessed July 19, 2013).

of Columbia.⁵ Our seminary is located in what has come to be called a “food desert.” My student Cara Morgan notes, “Often people living in these areas have little or no access to transportation, so being able to bring fresh produce and other healthy, fresh foods to their tables requires some creativity, much perseverance, and a little luck. Such families survive on processed and ‘junk’ foods bought from convenience stores, liquor stores, and corner groceries.”⁶

Even our rhythm of worship adds to the complexity of our relationship to food. One week we are celebrating abundance (Thanksgiving) and the next we have bulletin inserts with world hunger statistics and an invitation to contribute in order to alleviate what is a manageable crisis. In the same prayers of the church we both give thanks for our countless blessings and pray for the health of the malnourished students in our neighborhood elementary school. Is Scripture helpful when one Sunday we hear about overflowing bread and the next about the poor whom Jesus loves? One Sunday we hear the rich will go away empty and the next Sunday we hear the poor will always be with us.

I set out to address this complexity in our seminary worship later in the semester. I wanted to capture the dichotomy we discovered in the “Food Ethics and Faith” preaching unit, but the traditional solo preacher did not have the effect I was looking for. I engaged the wisdom of one of the students in the course, Sarah Flatt, and she and I crafted a “dueling sermon” which unapologetically suggested that the Bible seems to speak from the two sides of its mouth.⁷ The sermon “artifact” (that is, the written remains of performative event) that was preached in LTSS’s Christ Chapel (November 2012) is reprinted in full here. As you read, imagine two separate preachers addressing the whole congregation while disregarding one another (until a point later in the sermon).

THE SERMON

SARAH: A reading from Exodus, chapter 16 [11–21]: The LORD spoke to Moses and said, “I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the LORD your God.’” In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?” For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is

⁵Based on 2010 Census Data found at “Columbia, South Carolina,” *City-Data.com*, at <http://www.city-data.com/city/Columbia-South-Carolina.html> (accessed July 19, 2013).

⁶For more information on “food deserts,” see Sarah Treuhaft and Allison Karpyn, *The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters* (New York: PolicyLink and The Food Trust, March 2010), at <http://www.policylink.org/atf/cf/%7B97C6D565-BB43-406D-A6D5-ECA3BBF35AF0%7D/FINALGroceryGap.pdf> (accessed July 19, 2013).

⁷Sarah Flatt’s name and work are included here with her permission.

what the LORD has commanded: ‘Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer to a person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents.’” The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it bred worms and became foul. And Moses was angry with them. Morning by morning they gathered it, as much as each needed; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

SHAUNA: A reading from Ecclesiastes, the fifth chapter [5:18–20]. This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil—this is the gift of God. For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

BOTH: The word of the Lord.

SHAUNA: “Eat, drink, and find enjoyment in the toil.” This is just the kind of instruction we need in the thirteenth week of the semester, formerly known as the last week in the semester. Find enjoyment in the toil. Even the writer of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, the Teacher, the most cynical seminary student turned seminary professor there ever was, throws caution to the wind and says over and over, “Eat, drink, and be merry.” For what else is there?

SARAH: Bread. Enough for the day. Provided by God who has heard your complaining. This is such a familiar text to us; God providing for the whiny Israelites is part of our own holy history. This story is not new to any of us. We could name the “manna” God has given to each of us at different parts of our lives with relative ease. We have each received what we needed from God just as our desperation for tangible grace was nearly choking us: seminary partnership checks, care packages from our home congregations, letters of encouragement from friends far away.

Are these really manna though? Are these things filling our bodies morning by morning with just enough for the day? Does our modern-day manna make sure we have enough for ourselves and our family and that our neighbors also receive what they need?

We often look deeper into this text for the newest, most faithful interpretation, making it more complex than it appears. We forget that God wasn’t giving the Israelites symbols of God’s care for them; God was providing manna, morning by morning. God is feeding God’s people with daily bread. God gives enough for everyone, with no room for hoarding or overconsumption.

SHAUNA: Eat, drink, and you might as well enjoy your work, for everything else is *hevel*—or, in English, vapor.

In some ways times have not changed too much since Qoheleth's time; we are still people who grasp for meaning, who yearn for the concrete, and who unsuccessfully attempt to package or archive the ephemeral things in life. When is the last time you tried nailing vapor to your living room wall?

We are reminded today that food and drink are different. You can actually hold on to that pear. You can feel the heat of your morning tea make its way down your esophagus. Eat and drink, for these are the pleasures of life. All else is *hevel*.

Just when we think this might be Qoheleth's only reason for Happy Hour, Friday-night cookouts, and Sunday brunches, we hear that "these things are gifts from God. For that reason, live it up."

As our greed and hoarding of God's good gifts begin to take root in our lives, we take much from our neighbors around the corner, around the neighborhood, across the state, country, and globe. We are given enough, but we take so much more.

SARAH: We hear such simple instructions from the God who led the Israelites out of slavery: I will care for you, I will provide manna for you every day, and you will provide enough for your family—not too much, or too little. Take what you need, so others may do the same. But the Israelites don't listen.

We hear such simple instructions from our God who has set us free from our own self-seeking, self-serving sinfulness: I will care for you, I will provide manna for you every day, and you will provide for others—not too much or too little. Take what you need, so others may do the same. But we don't listen.

Our God cares for us, and yet we seek to fill ourselves with other things. We disregard such simple instructions; we hide such a gift, just as the Israelites did. Their excess spoiled in the noonday sun.

As our greed and hoarding of God's good gifts begin to take root in our lives, we take much from our neighbors around the corner, around the neighborhood, across the state, country, and globe. In spite of our hoarding tendencies, our excuses, and our unwillingness to see those in our lives who are desperately seeking their own manna, God continues to provide bread for God's children. We are given enough, but we take so much more.

This bread, manna, wasn't some sort of symbolic sign of God's provision; it was bread. It filled their stomachs, their bodies, so they could continue to worship the God who had freed them from slavery.

SHAUNA: Food and drink are clues about culture, location, and worldview. When I say "tacos," "salsa," "tequila"—what do you think of? Where am I? How about "grits," "collards," and "sweet tea"? How about this list: lamb, fish, pomegranates,

wild honey, locusts (?), mustard seed, figs, and salt? Have you noticed as you read the Bible that people are eating all the time? What they eat and drink—*how* they eat and drink—says something about their culture, location, and worldview.

SARAH: People's lack of food and drink says something about the broader culture, and our worldview.

SHAUNA: Scripture reminds us of the abundance of God's gift. The list of foods is longer than you might think. [Shauna's voice fades to a nearly inaudible level as she lists these foods so that Sarah's interruption will be heard.] Eggs, cheese, butter, vinegar, olive oil, almonds, apples, quail, wheat, barley, leeks, lentils, cucumbers, pistachios, melons, dates.

SARAH: [interrupting with hunger statistics]:

- 1 in 3 single-parent households experience food insecurity every year!
- 42% of those who receive the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits are under the age of 18!
- 20% of all children in Richland County live below the poverty line!
- In 2010, 33 million tons of food was thrown away in America!

[Spoken at the same time:]

SHAUNA: Enjoy, my friends, enjoy, for...

SARAH: Be mindful, my friends, be mindful for...

SHAUNA: *What* we eat and drink

SARAH: and *how* we eat and drink,

BOTH: *with whom* we eat and drink...

SARAH: ...are reflections of our relationship with our creator.

SHAUNA: Even more, these things shape our relationship with our creator. Food and drink are clues about culture, location, and worldview, yes. But they also say something about our lives of faith.

So, which is it? Does worshipping God look like enjoying the abundance given to us by God?

SARAH: Does worshipping God mean being mindful of our neighbors and their filled stomachs?

BOTH: YES! [At this point the "dueling preachers" acknowledge one another.]

SHAUNA: When Qoheleth cried out, "Eat and drink," finally, he does so out of reverence for and thanksgiving to a God of abundance. Not only does God provide abundance, God *is* abundance. That kind of abundance can be and was nailed down.

SARAH: When the Israelites ate the manna, they were trusting in God. They were worshipping God.

SHAUNA: In that list earlier, I did not mention the two most important food staples mentioned in the Bible: bread—loaves and loaves of bread—and wine,

overflowing. Did you notice in the Bible that these foods are for all and there is enough for all? Here too, bread and wine are for all and there is enough.

SARAH: There is no need to take more than you need, for tomorrow God will provide more. We know this. Trust it.

SHAUNA: Eat, drink...

BOTH: ...LIVE.

THE WORSHIP SERVICE

The proclamation of the texts did not stand alone. The worship service in which this sermon was preached was crafted and implemented in a way that reframed nearly everything in light of food. First, the traditional fourfold movement of “gather, word, meal, and sent” was changed to reflect a four-course meal of “appetizer, entrée, dessert, and *digestif*.” Indeed, we are nourished by each element in the liturgy.

Second, the prayers (prayer of the day, prayers of the church, Eucharistic prayer, offertory prayer, and post-communion prayer) were carefully crafted and/or chosen. The worship leaders interwove the prayers of the church with a sung response by the congregation. The complexity was named explicitly in the third petition of the prayers of the church: “O God, when we find ourselves confused over whether to celebrate abundance or mourn our hoarding and inequality of resources, help us to remember that all we have is from you.”

Third, we invited the community (seminary students, staff, administration, and faculty) to bring nonperishable food items to be given to the food pantry in an Eau Claire neighborhood church. This communal practice, along with the practice of eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ, were concretely life-giving.

Finally, the distribution of communion was augmented in order to model everyone’s role in sharing sustenance. The presiding and assisting ministers communed assistants who each offered bread and wine to one person who, in turn, took the bread and chalice of wine and offered it to the next person. Of course, as the “sous hosts” (Jesus is the host!), the presiding and assisting ministers communed last. The last line of the bulletin noted playfully, yet seriously: “Warning: hoarding or consumption of the meal for the whole world as if it is given only for those like you, those gathered here, those who you prefer it to be for, will result in a very narrow view of God’s grace...and indigestion.” The biblical texts, at first part of the confusion, were lived out in the worship service as a model for their being manifested in the world.

What began as simply a classroom assignment for some progressed into a recognition and embrace of the complexity of a faithful, Christian relationship to “daily bread.” ⊕

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