

St. Augustine's Sermons

Calgary, Alberta

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and
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The Ultimate Happy Meal

August 3, Holy Communion

The Text: Matthew 14:13-21

13 Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.' ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, 'They need not go away; you give them something to eat.' ¹⁷ They replied, 'We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.' ¹⁸ And he said, 'Bring them here to me.' ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

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Here I have a picture of a Happy Meal.

Chicken nuggets, French-fries, something to drink, and most important of all – a schlocky piece of plastic that, at least for the next five

minutes, spins, bounces, whirls, rolls, or whistles better than any other toy on earth.

Is there alive in North America an adult who's ever spent a lunch hour with a child without feeling compelled to buy a Happy Meal at some time or another?

The "happiness" this fat-and-calorie laden repast offers is absolutely momentary. Within minutes adults begin grousing at the child, "You aren't eating anything!" The child usually gets a toy that isn't the version they wanted; is one they already have; or is the wrong gender (boys end up with twirling, Barbie-esque creatures; girls find themselves with a space alien or race car).

The fries grow cold and "petri-fried," the nuggets congeal, the drink gets watery, and the toy gets broken. Wearily and frustratingly we sweep the mess into its bag and pitch it into the nearest trash can.

The "happy" in the happy meal is long gone, long forgotten as we argue all the way home.

Associating food with happiness is a habit we form as babies and keep trying to feed throughout our adult lives. Every year we hear dire reports about the ever-increasing chunkiness of North Americans. We super-size our fast food meals and end up super-sizing ourselves.

Never have we been so informed about the dangers of obesity, the threat of cancers, heart diseases, strokes, diabetes, and high blood pressure – all associated with high fat diets and low or no exercise lifestyles. So why are so many of us stopping at the take-out window at the same time we're stocking our freezers with "Lean Cuisine?" Are we hungering for something that we just can't seem to satisfy, no matter how many Happy Meals we ingest?

The issue is not eating. Jesus loved to eat. He was always going out to dinner, cooking meals for friends, inviting others to join him for a meal, ready to tend to the stomachs as well as the spirits of his disciples and followers. The straight-laced, rigidly religious Sadducees, Pharisees, and Scribes who took offense at Jesus' less-than-rigorous lifestyle often pointed to his eating habits as evidence of his dissolute character and indulgent habits: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2).

The story of God's relationship with humanity is littered with apple cores and bread crusts, soup pots and oil flagons. Food has led humanity astray even as it's bound us to the Divine. Can we forget that the first act of disobedience took the form of eating? Can we forget that the first consequence of disobedience was that raising crops for food became laborious, even painful? Can we forget that Esau traded his birthright, and forfeited his future for a pot of soup? We're creatures who continue to think and act and even pray with our stomach as much as with our hearts and minds and spirits.

Dorothy Day, a twentieth century Christian writer and activist reflected once on the importance of food in the Old Testament:

Adam raised food for himself and Eve, and did it with pleasure. After the fall of Adam, plowing and seeding and harvesting, earning one's daily bread either as a husbandman like Cain, or a shepherd like Abel, was a difficult and painful affair. Sacrifices of food were offered to the Lord, whether of beasts, or of bread and wine. These are all food stuffs, because food represents life. It represents our lives and we offer our lives to the Lord.

We also lust after food as Esau did when he sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. The Israelites complained of their food in the desert and yearned after the flesh pots of Egypt even with the bondage and slavery it entailed, even though the Lord fed them bread from heaven and water from the Rock, food that had every delight and taste. Who can forget the widow's cruise of oil which was never diminished; Ruth gleaning the corn; Daniel and his three companions living on oats, pea beans and barley corn?

The thirteenth Century Franciscan St. Bonaventure said that after the long fast of our Lord in the desert, when the angels came to minister to him, they went first to the blessed mother to see what she had on her stove, and got the soup she'd prepared and transported it to our Lord, who relished it the more because his mother had prepared it. (Meditations, selected and arranged by Stanley Vishnewski [New York: Paulist Press, 1970], 39-40 and On Pilgrimage)

Yet, if our stomach is capable of bringing us low, it's also sometimes the best organ for bringing us together. Convince two coworkers who never see eye-to-eye to sit down at a meal together and suddenly there's a common ground – the table. Countries incapable of signing peace treaties or accords attend formal state dinners, not for the

rubber chicken, but for the possibility that everything may look negotiable on a full stomach.

Have you ever tried to be angry with someone who just fed you a delicious meal?

In today's gospel text, Jesus is depicted as both a healer of physical infirmities, and one who feeds the poor multitudes that follow him. Both activities are motivated, Matthew's text makes clear, by compassion. There's nothing that testifies so directly to the power of the Incarnation as does Jesus' continual concern with the physical – not just spiritual – welfare of people.

Disease, deformity, and death were human conditions that Jesus could never ignore, never avoid. He'd waded into the crowds, go off the planned route, alter his whole agenda, in order to deal with the physical injuries and failings of others he encountered. The physical self was honored, healed, and helped. And Jesus never forgot that for men and women, young and old, the world always looked better, possibilities always looked brighter, on a full stomach.

Food was not some bothersome burden that the body occasionally demanded. Food, shared with friends, with enemies, with those who longed to learn, even with those who sought to harm, was an occasion for fellowship. Jesus knew and taught that the first taste of truth and love we might offer another may well be found in a simple loaf of bread, a broiled fish, or a glass of wine. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

George Herbert's poem has been described as the most mystical poem in any language. In this poem, Love insists on serving the guest. Of course "Love is Jesus and the "Guest" is you and me. I want to pause to listen to a most beautiful setting of the poem, set to music by the twentieth century English composer Ralph Vaughn Williams.

Love bade me welcome;
yet my soul drew back, Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked anything.

"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here."
Love said, "You shall be he."

"I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee."
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
"Who made the eyes but I?"
"Truth, Lord, but I have marred them;
let my shame Go where it doth deserve."
"And know you not," says Love,
"who bore the blame?"

"My dear, then I will serve."
"You must sit down," says Love,
"and taste my meat."
So I did sit and eat.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is the first real Happy Meal. The Eucharist overtones found in Jesus' actions, his blessing of the bread, his instructions to sit down and eat make the loaves and fishes enjoyed by these five thousand hangers-on and would-be, wanna-be followers, the first true Happy Meal.

Yet, the feat of this feast is a mere foretaste of the banquet Jesus the Messiah plans to offer. When the disciples gather at table with Jesus on that final Passover eve, he breaks bread and pours wine and institutes for all who will follow the ultimate, definitive Happy Meal. Here's a feast that really satisfies, filling heart and soul, mind and body, with the flavor of fulfillment and forgiveness. Only at Jesus' table can our hungers finally be eased, our gnawing needs finally fulfilled. The Bible says that God is the Lord of the Feast.

And men will come from east and west, from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God. (Luke 13:29 RSV)

9 Then the angel said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!' " And he added, "These are the true words of God." (Revelation 19:9)

How many billions served?

That's up to you and me.

A little boy from the inner city was struck by a car and taken to the hospital. It was quickly determined that he wasn't seriously injured, but the doctor ordered that the boy remain overnight for observation. In due course, a nurse brought a tray to his bedside. On it was a tall

glass of milk and a light snack. As the little boy reached out for the tray, he remembered the way it was at home: he had to share with all his brothers and sisters. He placed the tray on his lap and said to the nurse, 'How much can I eat and how much can I drink?'

And the nurse said to him quietly, "Eat and drink as much as you can."

That's what Jesus says to every one of us this morning. At the Ultimate Happy Meal, you can eat and drink as much as you can.