

EAT THIS BREAD; DRINK THIS CUP

What a change there has been in my eating habits in the past year! When we moved into Drum Hill in January, 2004, I was eating normally, able to order anything I wanted from the daily menu. I really enjoyed having soup twice a day and salads available on request. These, along with a variety of drinks and good desserts, bracketed the two entrees and the sides offered at every meal. Add to that the sociability offered by the assigned tablemates in our communal dining room and meal times were highlights of the day.

But my disease, Primary Lateral Sclerosis, is progressive. On a fact sheet entitled "What Is PLS?" this statement appears: "PLS is life-style threatening, not life threatening. It is not fatal." I can certainly vouch for the first part of that statement, but not for the last. I asked the specialist at Mt. Sinai hospital in Manhattan about that and he said, "Well, eventually it kills you." That sounds fatal to me! As I see it, my two main threats (other than falling) are pneumonia due to aspiration and choking. Both involve eating.

Twice last year I had pneumonia that I did not recognize as soon as I should have, both caused by aspiration. I had a number of serious, frightening episodes of coughing and choking with both solids (a speck of dry toast) and liquids (tomato juice, even saliva) as catalysts. So last July when a person from the Visiting Nurses Association suggested a drastic change in my diet, I was ready to listen. Further modification in December has severely limited what I can eat, and all liquids must be thickened to nectar consistency. In addition, I have been told that I must think about having a feeding tube inserted into my stomach!

Swirling in my mind are all kinds of thoughts and emotions concerning eating. Writing them down may help to straighten things out for me. Perhaps something will resonate with you as well. God is good and what God does is good. That I know for sure!

It's funny how old, familiar Bible stories take on new meaning when you see them from a different point of view. Believe it or not, today – with my food prohibitions – I find myself thinking of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They had a forbidden food list, too, although only one item was written on it. *The Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die" (Genesis 2:16,17).* Notice that the tree was not hidden away so that the temptation would be lessened, but it was right there with all the foods that were permitted to them. God designed people with eyes that see and with taste buds that can anticipate the taste even before the first bite. *When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, ... she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, and he ate it (Genesis 3:6).*

One of the first Bible verses that I memorized as a new believer was 1 Corinthians 10:13: *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to us all. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* Adam and Eve found the fruit to be tempting. Did God offer them a way of escape, a way to avoid eating it?

I have a dear friend who, years ago, had a problem with alcohol abuse. She says the temptation is still present, no matter how much time has gone by since her last drink. My friend told me her secret for avoiding alcohol: once, in a tempting time, she suddenly visualized the devil in the bottle. The vision was strong enough for her to put the bottle down and it has helped her ever since. I would say God did something similar for our first ancestors: he gave them a warning of dire consequences – death! – if they ate it. Any time they passed the tree they could superimpose images over it that

would help them stay clear of arms reach: an image of themselves as dead, for example, or of God, their friend, saying “No.”

As for me, I am trying something similar. I look at foods and drinks that I used to enjoy and say to myself, Would a taste of this be worth risking pneumonia? Choking? With my rational mind I can easily answer that, but my emotions are another story; they have not yet caught up with my mind.

I can't avoid being around foods that I may not eat. Nor can I avoid hearing people eat in ways I no longer can. Crunch! Snap! Chewchewchewchewchew! Swallow. Crunch! etc. I realize they are not the ones who need to make changes; I must. I chew slowly and must not tire my mouth and throat muscles with much chewing. How easy it would be to fall into self-pity here. But I am not the only one with forbidden foods. Think of those with food allergies or diseases such as diabetes, those who are lactose intolerant. In light of these common conditions, why does my food restriction seem so severe to me?

I can think of two reasons. First, this is a permanent condition. Many times in the past I was on a soft diet for a few days; always the end was in sight. I am jolted when I drink my breakfast now to realize that I will never eat a bowl of cereal again. An image from the past comes to mind. In it I am a young bride, standing in the kitchen of our first apartment in Huntsville, Alabama. “How in the world will I cook three meals a day, day after day, for the next forty or fifty years?” I wondered. I said to myself, “You will do it one meal at a time.” And I did. Now I must do so again with my eating: concentrate on one meal at a time. Thinking too far into the future or looking back is not good for me.

The second is that I am confronting in a new way the incredible strength of memory in the eating process. Eating involves so many senses: taste, sight, hearing, touch. For some reason corn on the cob has entrenched itself in my memory. Corn, of course, is on my forbidden list. My father grew corn in our vegetable gardens in Annville, PA. Mom would cook the freshly picked ears and serve them piled high on large platters. Dad, Mom, my brother Harold and I (brother Bob came along later) devoured mounds of corn, ear after ear, all summer long. We slathered butter on each ear and liberally sprinkled it with salt before lifting it to our mouths (no corn holders then). I can still hear the sounds of the four of us munching away and feel the butter dribbling down my arms as we enjoyed the fruits of Dad's and Mom's labor. Mom taught Harold and me to eat two rows at a time. We challenged each other to see if we could find an ear of corn with an uneven number of rows. It never happened. Little did I know when I ate corn on the cob at Drum Hill in the picnic-style lunches we sometimes had last summer that I would never have that treat again.

On the other hand, focusing on the foods that I am allowed to eat has brought me a different kind of distress. During all the years of my Bible teaching and preaching, I have been very hard on the Israelites for complaining about the manna in the wilderness. “After all,” I would say, “God gave them that provision! And manna could be prepared in a variety of ways.” I could see no excuse whatsoever for their lack of gratitude. Never did I dream that I would begin to see the situation from their point of view! But after six months of drinking practically the same mixtures day after day, I must confess that I'm tiring of the routine. And I'm not even close to the forty years the Israelites ate manna! I wonder: Can tiring of foods and gratitude coexist? Can stating the truth be done without complaining? I certainly hope so! An Indian prayer on a plaque that hung for many years on the wall in our New York house is also appropriate here. It said (to the best of my memory): “O Great Spirit, Grant that I may not criticize my neighbor until I have walked a mile in his moccasins.”

I now know that accepting my dietary limitations will be an ongoing project. With blending or thickening I can adapt many foods I might want. The taste of “cool, clear water,” however, will remain a memory. Yes, I will apply the techniques I have mentioned in other essays. God is my rearguard and his grace will continue to be sufficient for me. I will also be thankful. People are different in how they react to losses. John, who rides in a power chair at Drum Hill, as I do, hates his chair. “I'd rather be playing tennis,” he says. I am so glad for my chair and for the mobility it gives me, but I miss certain

eating experiences.

Have you ever wondered whether we will eat in Heaven? I can't be certain, but I think we will. For one thing, Jesus in his resurrection body ate a piece of broiled fish while visiting his followers. Also, a wedding banquet is in store for us in Heaven. Somehow I picture food at that event. And finally, Revelation 22:2 says: *On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month.* I wonder: Why would there be fruit trees in Heaven unless we would be able to eat that fruit? I do not expect that we will be hungry or have to eat routinely, but occasionally? We'll see!

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There are many stories in the Bible about food and drink that I could use with this essay, but two related ones linger in my mind, demanding attention. The first story is obscure, hidden in the larger story of Abraham (still named Abram at the time). He and his servant army had just defeated an alliance of kings who, among other things, had abducted his nephew Lot. As Abram was returning home, we read this in Genesis 14:18-20: *Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.*

From his mention in Psalm 110:4 and the lengthy analysis in Hebrews 5-7, I believe Melchizedek was a type of Christ, that is, one of the many people in the Old Testament who in some way prefigured Christ. Our appreciation of Jesus is greatly enhanced by "seeing" him in the types. Melchizedek was a priest (though not of the tribe of Levi) whose birth and death are not recorded, making him seem like a priest with no beginning or end. Jesus is our Great High Priest, also not descended from Levi, and truly eternal. I believe, too, that the bread and wine the king of Salem served Abram symbolize the sacrifice Christ would make in the future.

The second related story is the supper that Jesus had with his disciples the night before he died. This was where Jesus set up a way for us to commemorate his death, to remember him as our Savior and coming King. He used common food and drink – bread and wine – as symbols of his death, so that, if we wanted to, we could turn our thoughts to Jesus every time we ate a meal.

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From childhood I have enjoyed taking part in communion services. In the Church of the Brethren, the church in which I was raised, communion was part of a semiannual ritual called Love Feast. It included a simple supper based on a delicious beef barley soup; a foot washing ceremony; the passing of a holy kiss; and communion, with strips of unleavened bread and cups of grape juice as elements. We would break off a piece of the bread and serve it to the next person, and then pass along the strip; we drank juice from the communal cup as it came around to us. I could only be an observer until I was baptized at age eleven, although children were welcomed and treated kindly. After baptism, I could sit on the women's side of the church, where all of us had our heads covered with various styles of caps made of netting, and participate fully as a member of the congregation.

At the age of twenty-three I began worshiping with Plymouth Brethren assemblies. For the next twenty years a Breaking of Bread service every Sunday morning started our week. The elements varied somewhat from place to place, but in our usual assembly we used a loaf of bread from which we each in turn broke off a piece for ourselves, and a cup of wine which we sipped as it was passed around. We women sat in silence, our heads covered with hats or scarves of our choice, while the men audibly prayed or gave meditations from the Bible. At times I chafed at the restrictions given to women; I was so full of beautiful thoughts that I felt I must speak or pray aloud. I didn't, of course.

For the next fifteen years we worshiped at an evangelical Bible church that served communion on

the first Sunday of the month and occasionally at other times. Plates piled with cubes of bread were passed and we each took one. Then round trays filled with tiny glasses of grape juice were passed and again, we each took one. The women in this church did not cover their heads and soon I, too, was bare headed. Then I learned more: it was not God who had silenced and covered the women, but rather well-meaning people who misunderstood the intent of a few verses.

I was now free to take part in an amazing adventure with God. From 1991 until 2000 I was pastor of another independent evangelical church. Now I could serve communion monthly as well as give a Good Friday communion service. I loved it! Now I had a place to use all the wonderful thoughts I had collected through the years.

Since my retirement I have been worshiping at a United Methodist Church nearby. As in the church I pastored, a variety of methods of serving communion are used there, but they always include some kind of bread and grape juice. I no longer drive, but my friend Cliff (or someone else from the church in his absence) comes to Drum Hill to transport me to services. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:26: *Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.* I have been happily doing this since childhood and will continue as long as I am able.

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The statement that grips my attention about the last supper is found in Luke 22:14-16: *When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."* "Eagerly desired" are strong words for Jesus to use concerning his feelings about the meal, suggesting the possibility of deep satisfaction at the conclusion, as well. These words took on new meaning for me after my husband and I participated in an unusual event in 1985.

Leo and I had a long-standing friendship with Charlie and his mother Nellie, who lived together in White Plains, NY, a half hour from us. In the spring of 1985 Nellie, a widow in her 80s, went to the hospital for what was expected to be routine abdominal surgery. Instead she received stunning news: she was full of cancer and had only a few months to live. After processing the report, Nellie set about preparing to die. She began to give away some of her possessions. We were included among the recipients of her generosity – one of her oil paintings is in my room in Drum Hill. Knowing that our son George and his wife Janet were expecting their first child, she finished crocheting a baby blanket and gave it to us to deliver when the baby was born. Eric's date of birth was September 9, 1985. Nellie was in Heaven before then.

There was something else on Nellie's mind. She had half a turkey in her freezer that she did not want to leave behind. Thinking that Charlie would not want to cook it and not being able to do it herself, she phoned me with her request. "Would you and Leo come to my house some day and make a turkey dinner for the four of us?" she asked. I assured her that we would, but no date was set. She called again: "When can you come to prepare the meal?" Nellie really wanted that turkey dinner!

Finally the day came. Nellie had thawed the turkey and, in her kitchen, Leo and I roasted it and prepared other foods to round out the meal. We set the table for four, sat down, gave thanks to God, and began to eat. Nellie ate little due to her illness, but she was very happy to be at the table with us. Something important to her had now been accomplished and her satisfaction was a pleasure to see. As we were eating the thought hit me: Why, we are participating in a last supper! And it was good for each of us to be there.

Why did Jesus eagerly desire to eat that particular Passover meal with his followers? I'm sure there were many reasons, some of which we can easily figure out and some known only to him. But what

brings me joy as I write is the fact that Jesus did get to do what he really wanted to do before he died. And I'm thankful for the experience I had with Nellie. She serves as such a good example for me of a believer facing death, even giving me insight into the last supper!

Cliff pushed my wheelchair up the aisle on the first Sunday of 2005 so I could take part in the communion service. I received the bread, grateful that the body of Christ had been broken for me. I dipped it into the grape juice. Oh, the precious blood of Jesus, shed for the world, shed for me. Cliff pushed me to the altar rail so I could have a moment of quiet contemplation. That's when I remembered. I couldn't eat that bread! Bread is on my list of forbidden foods. Should I eat it anyway, hoping that God would see to it that I wouldn't choke on communion bread? What would you have done?

Surely when Jesus spoke of our eating his flesh and drinking his blood in John 6:48-58 he was speaking figuratively, not literally. John 3:16 says that whoever believes in him has eternal life. In John 6:54 Jesus says, *"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life."* Union with Christ comes with faith, not with ritual. Somehow believing in Jesus fulfills the requirement of "eating his flesh and drinking his blood." Likewise, communion with our Lord and with fellow believers can take place with or without actually eating bread and drinking juice.

I got out a tissue and wrapped the bread in it. This would be my way of taking communion from now on: I would take it inwardly while discarding the elements outwardly. I know the Lord understands. Is it loss that I am feeling, or just a change, a spiritualizing, a deepening of the ceremony? I need more time to think about this. And when I see my Lord face to face – well, then, it won't matter anymore. There will be no communion services in Heaven!

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