

Sermon: The Jesus Diet

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, August 11, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Dieting for weight loss is all the rage these days. Sure, people do go on diet for health related reasons, such as diabetes or to reduce cholesterol level. But losing weight, for most people, is still the primary objective.

There are various dieting regiments out there. The Atkins Diet was originally promoted by Dr. Robert C. Atkin, in his best-selling book in 1972. It is all about low-carb eating, zeroing in on reducing carbohydrate intake as the primary way to produce faster weight loss. Although a famous diet, many people do find it not sustainable, for carbs is the key energy source that our bodies do need.

The Zone Diet, made popular by actress Jennifer Aniston, is a more balanced diet of 40% carbs, 30% protein and 30% fat. However, this diet regime has a long list of off-limits nutritious foods, such as bananas, raisins, potatoes and corn, making it harder to stick to in the long term.

The Keto Diet is a high-fat, low carb (very low carb) diet, originally developed as a medical diet in the 1920's, for the treatment of epilepsy. It had to wait 100 years to reach its peak popularity among the general public. It is effective as the body, while unable to find carbs to burn, switches to burning fat as the main energy source. The downside is that people may eat a lot of meat and cheese, which could contribute to an excess intake of saturated fat—the type that raises the risk for heart disease. Another downside of this diet is the insufficient consumption of fruits and vegetables, which is somewhat counter-intuitive for healthy eating.

The Master Cleanse is a liquid-only diet, consists of a concoction of water, lemon juice, maple syrup and cayenne pepper. Strictly speaking, it is not a diet but a detoxing cleanse, usually for a period of 10 days. As reported by USA Today, Beyonce had used it to lose 20 pounds in two weeks for her role in the 2006 movie Dreamgirls. But this juice fast does not provide sufficient nutrients, and any weight loss is likely temporary when one gets back to eating solid food.

Talking about diet, one ought to mention the Canada Food Guide, published by the Government of Canada, and updated frequently. The latest version is accompanied by a picture of a large plate containing various food items, suggesting a balance diet of 50% vegetables and fruits, 25% proteins, and 25% carbs of the whole-grain variety. Sounds healthy but somewhat ambitious.

I should say that is what my dietitian is recommending for me, describing my condition as pre-diabetic. When I mentioned this to my dad, who practiced as a medical doctor in Taiwan before retiring, he kind of scoffed at it, saying (I am paraphrasing here): everyone is pre-diabetic! It's kind of like calling someone pre-death. I think I get his point: for indeed the Scripture describes our outward beings as perishing, [with the hope] that our inward beings are being renewed day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16)

All this talk of dieting begs the question that I would like to pose to you today: Have you ever try out the Jesus Diet? The Jesus Diet! What is that? Some of you will undoubtedly say that Jesus never taught what to eat or what not to eat. Well, I beg to differ.

In our Scripture reading today of John 6, particularly verse 35, Jesus said, *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."* Further on in verse 51, he reiterates again, *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."* In essence, Jesus is declaring himself to be bread, to be food, to be consumed.

Ah, some of you will undoubtedly say, "Pastor, these passages are supposed to be read symbolically and metaphorically. Jesus is not asking us to literally eat his flesh, is he?" Well, if you read pass verse 51 and continue on, you will come to see Jesus affirming the literal meaning of his words. In fact, he seems to push pass 'flesh as bread', as difficult of a concept already, and invites us to that horrifying thought: to 'drink his blood'. *"Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you."* (v.53)

I should note that such a literal, graphic, and offensive invitation from Jesus to eat his flesh and to drink is blood, led to the first real disruption of the Jesus Movement. Up until this point in the Gospel, Jesus was drawing an ever increasing larger crowd. But after this point, the crowd dispersed with only the hard-core disciples, the Twelve remained.

Ironically, the literally reading of these words of Jesus, which he invited in the first place, was used by detractors of Jesus to diminish his teaching. The Jewish religious authority attacked both the message and the messenger vigorously. The Romans took it a step further, calling the early Christians as superstitious, depraved, incestuous and cannibalistic, with one primary source describing the Christian ritual as "eating and drinking the body and blood of their god."

Understandably, interpretations of these passages from the very early Church Fathers onwards tend towards symbolic. The food that Jesus offers is his teachings during his earthly ministry, and they are nutritious and delicious. The Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, his teaching on forgiveness, on compassion, on love: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbour as yourself. Two simple commandments that neatly sum up all the Law and the Prophets.

Not just his teachings, Jesus offers up his life as an example for us to follow. The way he reached out intentionally to sinners, to the outcasts, those rejected by the societal norm of his day. The way he spoke truth to power, prophetic and unafraid. The signs and miracles he performed, healing the sick, opening the sight of the blind, casting out unclean spirits, all the while proclaiming hope in the coming Kingdom of God. I could go on for hours, but I think you get the point.

Such symbolic reading of John 6 is justifiable theologically as well, as 'flesh becoming words', the exact opposite of the doctrine of incarnation, of 'words becoming flesh' in John 1. If Jesus, as Logos the Word of God, can become flesh, what is to say that his flesh could not become Logos again, as words that lead us to God. The Jesus Diet in such a case, is food for the soul—nutritious, delicious and leading to not just abundant life, but to eternal life.

As Blaise Pascal, one of the greatest Christian minds of the 17th century, once famously said, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man, which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ." Truly, our hunger, our thirst, both physical and spiritual, can only be filled and satisfied by God, as Saint Augustine declares in Confession, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." So says Jesus, *"I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."*

Other than the literal or symbolic readings of these words, there is a third way, which I call it a 'sacramental' reading. In light of what Jesus had done for us on the cross, in light of him offering up his body as sacrifice, and offering up his blood as redemption for humanity, to wash clean our sin-sick-souls, we come to these words of Jesus with a renewed understanding and conviction.

During the Last Supper, *while they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat, this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."* The same Lord who declares his flesh as bread for eating in John 6, also declares bread to be his own body and wine to be his blood, in the Last Supper. "Do this," says Jesus, "in remembrance of me."

In such a sacramental reading, in the actual sacrament of the Holy Communion, his body becomes part of our physical body. Our bodies become part of his body. The boundaries that we draw between us and him no longer hold. The boundaries that we draw between the spiritual and the physical no longer hold. The boundaries that we draw between ourselves and others who share in this one bread that is his flesh, in this one cup that is his blood no longer hold. We eat and drink together in Christ, and our bodies are inexorably transformed.

Have you tried the Jesus diet yet? It's really good for your body and your soul. Come and taste that the Lord is good.

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