**A Theology of Food** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake  
Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church Isaiah 55:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21 Saint Paul, Minnesota  
August 6, 2023

*Any fans of Mexican cuisine here this morning?*

No one makes molé to eat alone. That fact is central to Dominican monk Angel Méndez Montoya’s creative and enlivening book, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist,* which begins with a friend’s recipe for molé. The recipe lists 33 ingredients, each of which must be individually prepared before being ground into a paste and finally combined with still more ingredients to make a sauce. One bite of molé, Méndez contends, contains the entire world. And molé should always be eaten in communion with others, preferably in celebration.

For Méndez, molé is a metaphor for *theology.* Theology should be a process of nourishment that takes complex ingredients—*“material and spiritual, individual and cultural, the body and the senses, meaning-making and desire”—*and combines them into a whole. Like molé, theology should enliven and awaken us, leaving us more nourished and more ready to do God’s work in the world.

In fact, Méndez’s theology evokes a God with a desire for humanity *so intense* that God provides God’s self as food for our nourishment.

While molé offers the introductory metaphor, the simpler meal of *the Eucharist* is at the heart of the book, just as it is at the heart of the Christian faith. For example, when we taste the Eucharist, we taste and know God. Méndez points out that in Spanish *“taste”* (*sabor*) and *“to know”* (*saber*) come from the same root, as does *sapientia*, *wisdom*. Tasting is a very intimate form of knowing.

Méndez’s discussion of Eucharist, of course, is rooted in a Catholic understanding of the Eucharist as *transubstantiation,* but all Christians *“taste”* the Eucharist and thus *“know”* God in a similar way that does not seem to rely on a belief about the way in which bread and wine become the body and blood.

For Méndez, Eucharist is a playful movement between God and humanity, neither one being able to claim absolute ownership over the Eucharist itself, as it moves back and forth between them, uniting them. Every meal, he says, is an opportunity to consider the theology of food, and all bread shared is God shared. Eating anything, from molé to Eucharist to *“our daily bread,”* is an act imbued with both theological and political meaning. God offers us nourishment, even the nourishment of God’s self, and then invites us to extend this gesture to others. We are invited to participate in *the divine economy* by sharing our own daily bread and inviting others to the divine feast.

In other words, Eucharist trains us in *sharing* and in what Méndez calls a *“complete act of feeding.”* In the complete act, God becomes food, we become God, God becomes us, and all gathered at the table become one with one another. As we become inextricably interrelated, we come into a physical and spiritual understanding of our proper place in the divine economy.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Let’s think about these things in terms of our first scripture reading for today—Isaiah 55.

You see, *the prominent place of food and meals in the Bible* may be surprising to us fast-food and take-out eaters. Back in biblical times, gathering and preparing food took time and occupied a significant part of Israel’s life. The danger of famine (due to natural calamities or crop failure) gave special importance to food. Water was drawn from a well or spring, not a faucet or commercial bottle. Bread was baked from scratch, and beans and lentils simmered for hours.

Food was also a means of conveying *spiritual significance.* Half of the parables Jesus told concerned seeds and farmers, barns and banquets, wheat and figs. Meals were linked with the forming of covenants (Exod. 24:11), and food sacrifices with sacred worship. Having fasted for 40 days, the famished Jesus was tempted to turn *“stones into bread.”* Then, teaching his disciples to pray, he said, *“Give us this day our daily bread,”* meaning the bread to meet today’s hunger as well as the future bread of the kingdom, when *“many will come from east and west and sit at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob”* (Matt. 8:11). In the messianic kingdom, vineyards and gardens would flourish and there would be an abundance of food.

Isaiah captured the same nexus between meals and bonding. *“All you who are thirsty, come to the water! . . . Come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk! . . . Heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare. . . . I will renew with you the everlasting covenant, the benefits assured to David”* (Isa. 55:1-3). The prophet invited the Israelites, now in exile in Babylon, to come to a lavish meal and receive a renewal of covenantal blessings. Of course, the danger for the exiles was that of becoming obligated to their captors and present benefactors and adapting to the bread of Babylon. Being assimilated into a foreign way of life and forgetting their roots was a real temptation. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann sharply notes, *“Whoever feeds, owns.”* Food, he says, comes with a price. *“Eat royal bread and think royal thoughts. Eat royal bread and embrace royal thoughts.”* Isaiah reminded the Israelites that who fed them and what they ate were no small matter. Why should they continue with food that did not nourish? The Israelites were a people of different bread, another way, a bread that came as a gift.

Homecoming sounded good to the exiles, but the moment was unpromising. Some couldn’t see anything happening and doubted that anything would ever happen. But Isaiah reassured them that God’s *“unfailing love”* would not be shaken and God’s *“covenant of peace would not be removed”* (Isa. 54:10).

Centuries later another prophet declared: *“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty”* (John 6:35).

Isaiah, you see, took up an issue that goes beyond exile and the pressure to acclimate to royal bread. It’s about our humanness—how we may succumb to any number of captivities. To run with the Babylonian pack is not the only conformity to which we are tempted to submit our lives—we are potentially subject to many tyrannies, both outside and within ourselves.

But God is not waiting for us to figure out everything, not hesitating to act until there is evidence that we will put our questions aside. *“Love bears all things,”* even our questions and protests. God will come forward. We *“wait and see,”* and in the meantime we *“take and eat.”* The meal is free and holds the promise of freeing us from whatever holds us captive.[[2]](#footnote-2)

And so, with this in mind, let me ask you a question: *“For what do you hunger?”*

According to Sam Wells, there are two kinds of hunger. First, there’s a hunger that has a *name.* It’s a hunger where you know what you want but you haven’t got it or can’t have it: when you interviewed for a job, and you can’t understand why they didn’t appoint you; when you long with all your heart to have a baby, but it’s not happening; where you’re dying for something to eat, but the cupboard’s bare; when you just want something, something in your life to go right for a change, but people keep letting you down. Such hunger can become all-consuming, transforming your temper, your relationships, your patience, your clarity of thought, your whole character. We are what we eat, they say. We’re also capable of becoming contorted into the shape of what we hunger for.

But there’s another kind of hunger. It’s a hunger that lingers deep, disturbingly, in the bottom of your soul, *but it doesn’t have a name*. There’s no simple solution to it, no hot meal or job title or box ticket that will satisfy it.

The trouble is, even if we’ve never experienced near starvation, we can all express vividly what the first kind of hunger feels like—and what it’s like to devour a meal when you’ve been waiting hours and are feeling faint and beginning to shake with longing for food. But the second kind of hunger—that’s more difficult*. How do you describe what it feels like to realize that you still haven’t found what you’re looking for?*

Isaiah 55 is precisely about these two kinds of hunger and the difference between them. For 50 years in Babylonian exile, Israel was focused on the first kind of hunger—quite simply, *“I want to go home.”* Everything that was wrong was crystallized in one simple fact—Israel was a thousand miles from the Promised Land, and on any hierarchy of needs returning to the land of David and Solomon was foundational.

But Isaiah 55 marks a transition into the second kind of hunger. Because Israel did go home from Babylon. Israel did return to the Promised Land. Jerusalem was restored, the Temple rebuilt, the walls raised again. But when all that was done, Israel was still hungry. It turned out going home wasn’t all that Israel was hungry for.

*“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”* These are the resonant words of Isaiah to Israel. It’s a question that points out the difference between the hunger that has a name and the hunger that doesn’t have a name. Working out the difference between the two is the key to ministry and mission.

We often think of practical Christianity as striving to meet *the hunger that has a name:* for the starving, food; for the thirsty, water; for the naked, clothing; for the sick, medicine. All of which is good and right and true.

Christianity, however, isn’t simply about satisfying people’s hunger. It’s a huge gamble on the hunch that what people are really hungry for *is something they don’t know the name of and wouldn’t initially recognize even when they found it.*

And what is that mysterious discovery, that extraordinary food? It’s the wondrous truth that there’s something even deeper, even more long-lasting, and even more insatiable than our hunger. And that’s God’s hunger for us. *“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts,”* we’re told in Isaiah 55.

God’s hunger is greater than ours. But God knows what that hunger is for. It’s for us.

So, are you hungry? Does your hunger have a name, like a yearning for a job or a partner or a home or a new start? Or is your hunger deeper and more insatiable than that, something that even gaining those precious things won’t assuage?

*“Listen carefully to me,”* says Isaiah, *“and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” “Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.”* It’s free but not cheap—it’s priceless but for everybody. If you’re hungry—deeply, deeply hungry—hear the good news, the news that you’ve been waiting all this time for: *God’s hungry. Hungry for you.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

1. Angel F. Méndez Montoya, *The Theology of Food: Eating and the Eucharist,* Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, as reviewed by Amy Frykholm in *The Christian Century,* June 1, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Peter L. Steinke, *Free Meal: Isaiah 55:1-9,* The Christian Century, February 1, 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sam Wells, *The Hunger That No Meal Satisfies,* The Christian Century, February 14, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)