

The Ultimate Happy Meal

Matthew 14:13-21

CAN ANYONE IDENTIFY THIS? A cheeseburger, 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.

Yep – it's a McDonald's Happy Meal.

The "happiness" this fat-and-calorie laden meal offers is absolutely momentary. I have heard adults grouse at their child within a few minutes, **"You're not eating anything!"**

The child usually gets a toy that isn't the version they wanted; OR 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 burger begins to congeal, the drink gets watery, and the toy gets broken. Wearily they sweep the mess into its SACK and pitch it into the nearest trash can.

The "happy" in the happy meal is long gone, long forgotten.

Equating happiness with food is a habit we form as babies. As adults we seem to keep tying happiness to food throughout our lives. Every year we hear dire reports about the ever-increasing chunkiness of Americans. We super-size our fast food and that results in 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 eat?

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 immoral character and decadent habits: ***"This man welcomes sinners and eats with them"*** (Luke 15:2).

The history of God's relationship with humankind is littered throughout with apple cores and bread crusts, soup pots and oil skins. Food has led humanity astray even as it has 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 humans are creatures who continue to think and act and even pray with our stomach as much as with our hearts and minds and spirits.

One of Christianity's greatest 20th century leaders, Dorothy Day, once wrote 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. Food was offered because it represented our life – what we live by. We offered 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 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 container of oil that was never diminished; Ruth gleaning the grain; Daniel and his three companions living on oats, CHICK PEAS and barley; and the meal that was served to Daniel in the lions' den by the prophet Habakkuk? St. Bonaventure said that after the forty day 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 all the more because his mother had prepared it."

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 have seen 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 seem negotiable on a full stomach.

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

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus is depicted as both a healer of physical infirmities, and one who feeds the poor multitudes that follow him. Both activities are motivated, according to Matthew's text, 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 the spiritual – welfare of people.

Disease, deformity, and death were human conditions that Jesus could never ignore, never avoid. He'd wade into the crowds, go off the planned route, and alter his whole agenda, in order to deal with the physical injuries and diseases of those he encountered. The physical self was honored, healed, and helped. 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 him, was an occasion for fellowship. Jesus knew and taught that the first taste of truth and love we might

offer one another may be found in a simple loaf of bread, a broiled fish, or a glass of wine. Taste and see that the Lord is good.

The story of the feeding of the five thousand is the first real Happy Meal. Jesus' actions foreshadow Holy Communion:

- his blessing of the bread,
- his instructions to sit down and eat,

These actions make the loaves and fishes enjoyed by these five thousand wanna-be followers, the first true Happy Meal.

Yet, the triumph of this feast is merely a foretaste of the banquet Jesus the Messiah offers to the world. 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 meal 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.

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

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 want.**"

That's what Jesus says to every one of us this morning. At the Lord's Ultimate Happy Meal, you can eat and drink as much as you want until your needs are satisfied.

Pastor Larry Smith

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