



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

📖 Hungry Souls
(*Food and Hunger*,
pp. 18-25)

📖 The Culture of Food
(*Food and Hunger*,
pp. 84-88)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
PO Box 97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

© 2004 The Center for Christian Ethics

Hungry Souls

Oscillating between the extremes of gluttonous indulgence and puritanical self-denial, we miss the true joy of eating. Furthermore, we distort our meals with our individualistic ways. No wonder many of us are leaving the table with hungry souls.

Prayer†

We cannot love God unless we love each other.

**We know God in the breaking of bread,
and we know each other in the breaking of bread,
and we are not alone anymore.**

Heaven is a banquet, and life is, too—even with a crust—as long as there is companionship.

We have all known loneliness.

**We have learned that the only solution is love.
And love comes with community.**

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:43-47

Reflection

Luke paints a word-picture of the exuberant hospitality of the first Christian communities: "Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people" (Acts 2:46-47a). In this snapshot, we also catch a winsome glimpse of their temperance.

The ancient virtue of temperance, *sôphrosunê*, is not the abstinence urged by modern "temperance societies." It's neither a constant struggle against bodily appetites nor a painful rejection of the joys of food and drink. Wendell Berry writes about "eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance," and a settled disposition toward this "fullest pleasure" is what the ancients had in mind. The point of temperance is "to make possible a right ordering of pleasure, an experience of pleasure at the right things in the right way," Hibbs says. "It is marked by ease and delight, not calculation and anxiety."

Overeating may be the most common way of missing the mark of temperance today, for polls show that about two-thirds of Americans are overweight. Yet, even the physically fit can miss the mark in another direction when they "exhibit a maniacal and excruciating devotion to a model of the perfect body."

The true joy of eating has a social dimension, but in our individualistic ways we're tempted to miss the mark of temperance by "consuming fast food in the privacy of our automobile or in front of the television, or in our communal eating we are preoccupied with private calculations of carbs and calories," writes Hibbs. "We are also...increasingly cut off from the natural sources of food production, from the planting and nourishing of the sources of food in the setting of the local farm."

The banquet celebration in the film *Babette's Feast* (1987) wonderfully depicts the "fullest pleasure" of eating. In the movie, an ascetic Christian community that has fallen into bickering and accusations is transformed during a lavish dinner. Their cook, Babette, prepares the sumptuous feast out of gratitude for the community's giving her



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2004 The Center for Christian Ethics

refuge from war and in memory of their founding pastor. *Babette's Feast* "makes clear that bodily goods and sensible pleasures can be vehicles for the manifestation of grace, that is, they can be occasions of communal transformation," says Hibbs. "The reunification of the community through the feast confirms Wendell Berry's thesis that 'healing is impossible in loneliness; it is the opposite of loneliness. Conviviality is healing. To be healed we must come with all the other creatures to the feast of Creation.'"

Study Questions

1. How do your eating habits, and those of your family, measure up to the ancient virtue of temperance? Are you eating with the "fullest pleasure – pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance"?
2. Do you agree that *Babette's Feast* "transcends our popular way of framing the debate over appetite, which pits a repressive Puritanism [or, religious moralizing] against a celebration of the indulgence of untutored desire"?
3. What is the relation between Christian practice and true joy in Isaac Watts' "Come, We That Love the Lord"? Has this been true of your Christian discipleship?
4. Perhaps the most famous fictional cannibals are the Cyclops of Homer's *Odyssey* and Dr. Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Describe how they are similar, and how they differ. How do they illustrate the ancient and contemporary views of human beings' relation to the world?
5. After reading Wirzba's "The Culture of Food," can you see ways your congregation could "become a place wherein food's deep spiritual resonances are heard and celebrated"?

Departing Hymn: "Come, We That Love the Lord" (verses 1, 3, 9, and 10)

Come, we that love the Lord,
and let our joys be known;
join in a song with sweet accord,
and thus surround the throne.

Let those refuse to sing,
who never knew our God;
but children of the heavenly King
may speak their joys abroad.

The hill of Zion yields
a thousand sacred sweets
before we reach the heavenly fields,
or walk the golden streets.

Then let our songs abound,
and every tear be dry;
we're marching through Immanuel's ground,
to fairer worlds on high.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748), altered
Tune: ST. THOMAS (Williams)

[†]Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: An Autobiography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 285-286.

Hungry Souls

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, and 2 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce the ancient virtue of temperance as a disposition to enjoy proper pleasures, rather than to struggle with our appetites.
2. To examine the communal dimension of the proper pleasures of food and to criticize our individualistic ways of eating.
3. To explore contemporary movies and ancient literature for images of the proper attitudes toward eating.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Food and Hunger (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn, "Come, We That Love the Lord," locate the tune ST. THOMAS in your church hymnal or at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

Norman Wirzba writes, "Because food is essential to the processes of all life, it connects us directly to God as the Source of life. Whenever we eat, we are not simply consuming a fuel to get us through another day; rather we are participating intimately in God's divine economy of life and death. Eating is a sacramental act, an act that has the potential to bind us faithfully and charitably to each other, the creation as a whole, and God...."

"Our congregations can become places wherein food's deep spiritual resonances are heard and celebrated. With greater attention to the religious dimensions of food, we can become members of grateful, sharing communities rather than remain isolated, fretful consumers" (*Food and Hunger*, p. 88).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 2:43-47 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study compares the image of the early church in Acts 2:43-47 to the depiction of a grace-filled banquet in *Babette's Feast*, and contrasts these to the portrayal of cannibalism in Homer's *Odyssey* and the contemporary Hannibal Lector movies. Encourage a rich discussion of these films and literature, if members are familiar with them. Otherwise, the group can follow Hibbs' summary of these works of art, but focus its discussion on the Scripture passage and Isaac Watts' well-known hymn, "Come, We That Love the Lord."

At first we must struggle against some bodily appetites, employing all of our will-power to resist appetites that we know are desires for too much (or too little) of something, for the wrong sort of thing, or at the wrong time, and so on. Yet the goal of temperance is to move beyond this to a freedom in which our appetites are in harmony with our knowledge of reality. Scripture describes this growth from "knowledge with self-control" to freedom and love: "Thus [God] has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so

that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. For this very reason, you must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love" (2 Peter 1:4-7). When our loves are rightly ordered, we enjoy what Wendell Berry calls "the fullest pleasure."

Study Questions

1. Members might discuss what tempts them (1) to eat too much food, (2) to eat unhealthy foods, or (3) to be overly concerned with thinness and dieting. Do family members take time to enjoy eating together, or are meals simply squeezed into busy schedules? Do they usually eat alone, or with friends and family members?
2. Though the religious community is a Pietist group that stresses personal religious experience and devotional practices, Babette is a Roman Catholic from Paris. She does not see their shared Christianity as oppressive, but as illuminating the true joy of eating together in community. She introduces the community to the shared pleasures of the sumptuous banquet, but then willingly binds herself to them and embraces their generally ascetic eating habits. This goes against a common image of Christianity in popular culture, which sees it as indiscriminately repressing desires and spoiling our enjoyment.
3. In four verses Watts extols the "pleasures" and "joys" that we share as Christians (see all ten verses at www.cyberhymnal.org). Verses 8 and 9 employ images of delightful food—"celestial fruits" and "sacred sweets." Verse 2 announces his general theme: "The sorrows of the mind / be banished from the place; / religion never was designed / to make our pleasures less." True joy comes to those who "love the Lord" and "[know] our God" by marching in community to God's city, Zion. Other hymns by Watts are more individualistic (e.g., "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"), but all his pronouns are plural in this beautiful text.
4. Both the Cyclops in Homer's *Odyssey* and Hannibal Lector see themselves as superior to everyone and everything—in Homer's phrase, they "acknowledge no gods." Their cannibalism is depicted as a rejection of hospitality, of basic human concern for the stranger.

There are important differences. Homer depicts the Cyclops as physically repulsive, with only one central eye that, quoting Leon Kass, "seems to serve the mouth rather than the mind." Lector is a suave psychiatrist and expert musician, who just happens to enjoy eating his victim's liver "with a side dish of 'fava beans and a fine Chianti.'" Hibbs writes, "In Hannibal's world, where the divine, natural, and human orders have utterly dissipated, the only thing that matters is the cultivation and satisfaction of amoral aesthetic taste; all things, including human persons, become mere instruments of cultivated taste." Both cannibals represent, through their eating, their tyranny over other people and the world. In Cyclops this appears to be a repulsive distortion; in Lector, it's just the choice of a powerful "super-man" who chooses to live beyond good and evil. Which is more frightening?
5. Congregations can teach about pleasurable eating by example and practice as well as by direct instruction. How do members learn to select and prepare foods, share meals with others, and celebrate at mealtime in gratitude to God? Some congregations eat together in supper clubs and pot-luck banquets, share their food with the hungry, or visit the elderly with meals. These can be opportunities to learn about how food choices relate to our physical health, hunger in the world, and support of the people who work to provide our food.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.