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# Things We Never Preach About, Part I: Gluttony

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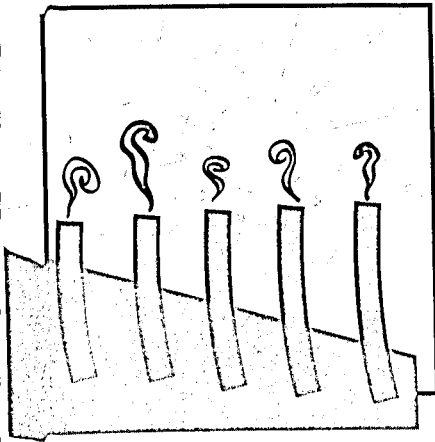
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## THINGS WE NEVER PREACH ABOUT, PART I: GLUTTONY

*Dirk G. Lange*



A recent article in *The Huffington Post* reported that, according to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, the “average restaurant meal is four—*four*—times larger than it was in the 1950s. In fact, 96% of entrees at chain restaurants exceed dietary guidelines for sodium, fat, and saturated fat per meal, according to a recent study. All those additional calories are a big problem—for our waistlines.”<sup>1</sup> There is, however, an even bigger problem. Not just our waistlines but our lifelines as persons and community are endangered.

We no longer talk about gluttony and certainly don’t preach about it very often. It is one of those seven deadly sins that seems to have slipped from sight, vanished from the horizon of what appear to be far more menacing sins (lust or greed, for example). Yet as a well-known libertarian radio talk-show host, Neal Boortz, once commented on the radio, it’s not sexuality that’s causing the demise of the family life in America, but McDonalds! We simply don’t eat together anymore.

Our relationship to food has gone bad. We don’t talk about gluttony or excess, even though we are aware of many eating disorders, from anorexia to bulimia to obesity. All of these disorders, whether binge-eating or extreme food restriction, suggest an unhealthy relationship to food, a relationship that is aggravated by social and cultural networks, stress factors of all kinds (the workplace, marriage, and so on), and of course in some cases genetics. Between 10% and 15% of all Americans currently suffer from some form of eating disorder. This statistic includes not only younger women and men but also people in midlife, according to the National Eating Disorders Association. Almost everyone in our congregations has encountered someone with an eating disorder. And everyone has a relationship to food. So why aren’t we preaching more about it?

There are certainly several answers to this question. Neal Boortz stated one: we aren’t looking at the obvious!

We look all around us and name a host of sins afflicting society but don’t see the one sitting right on our lap—or in our belly.

But there are others reasons as well. One can be found in Scripture itself. While we don’t find many passages there that explicitly deal with gluttony, we know that food is everywhere in Scripture. Even a short analysis reveals an approach that shifts human beings’ fundamental relationship to food. This is clear from the first chapters of Genesis. Human beings are given all the food they need for sustenance, particularly the plants, but food also becomes the indicator of self-centered inclination and finally unbelief. Food in abundance represents God’s favor, in the image

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of a land flowing in milk and honey, while famine shows God’s displeasure. Scripture is further full of invitations to feasts as continually recurring signs of God’s kingdom. Isaiah invites all to the feast in ch. 55; Wisdom sets a table in

Proverbs 9; the people celebrate the rediscovery of the law with a sumptuous feast for all in Nehemiah 8.

We are often left with the impression that we *ought* to be gluttons! “There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God”—so says Ecclesiastes 2:24. But this oft-cited passage is significantly different from the old adage to “eat, drink and be merry.” The merrymaking is not particularly or solely eating and drinking but the labor of our hands, the work in which we engage, the walk of life to which we have been called. The medieval reading of Ecclesiastes deemphasized the eating and drinking and focused on the vanity of all things. This reading encourages human beings to withdraw from the world, despising the goodness of creation and neglecting the holiness of everyday toil. Luther rejected this reading. For him, food and drink are God’s gift to us. It is a delight to eat and drink. It is even recommended for the sake of living out one’s vocation.

Perhaps the quintessential texts on food are found in Exodus and Numbers. “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day’” (Exodus 16:4). The people were not to take more than they needed, and there would always be enough for all. The relationship to food was one of both fulfillment and sufficiency. Those who “craved” (Numbers 11:34) or hoarded would be struck down or their manna would dissipate, vanish, or get infested with worms. Food becomes a malediction when it causes self-centered desire, when people take it for their own benefit. Gluttony is rooted in self-centeredness, whereas food and its distribution and enjoyment are the basis of a community ethic.

Many biblical stories underline this aspect of the role of food within society. It is never just a question of individual nourishment. “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest” (Leviticus 19:9). The people, the “congregation,” are to leave grain in the field at the time of harvest so that the poor can gather and find sustenance. Leaving the grain did not intend to make the landowner a better person but forced the landowner to be aware that all things are a gift and one’s own identity is wrapped up in the well-being of the community. Human beings are never isolated individuals but part of a complex social and economic fabric.

The law establishes the parameters of the covenant. They are addressed to the whole people, to “all the congregation of the people of Israel” (Leviticus 19:2). A healthy relationship to creation and an equitable relationship to the means of production and sustenance is critical for the maintenance of the covenant. When the people turn away from food as a gift, from creation as a means of sustenance for all, they equally turn away from the covenant. They break the First Commandment, for overabundance and self-indulgence turn the people to other

gods and so destroy the covenantal relationship between themselves and God—and ultimately among themselves, too. “For when I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I promised on oath to their ancestors, and they have eaten their fill and grown fat, they will turn to other gods and serve them, despising me and breaking my covenant” (Deuteronomy 31:20). Human beings are invited into a right relationship

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with food, one that allows them to enjoy food and yet perceives food as part of a creation meant for all.

Scripture’s approach to food is decidedly different from the approach to food and the question of gluttony that pervaded medieval theology. The focus of attention turns away from the community, from the goodness of God’s gifts, to the ways in which an individual is to live within the world. The purpose of life is to reach up toward God along the ladder of salvation, and thus leading a life of temperance was critical. Gluttony, as defined by Thomas Aquinas, was an

inordinate desire that abandons reason and seeks pleasure in this world rather than in God.<sup>2</sup> Thomas attempts to define the parameters of gluttony. It is not simply overeating. It is not just about the eating but the types of food involved and the desires (and therefore means of procuring) this food. A person can display an unhealthy desire or relationship to food in three ways: “first, by seeking costly or luxurious foods; second, by preparing foods with excessive effort; and third, by consuming food in excessive amounts.”<sup>3</sup> In terms of the act of eating, gluttony reveals itself when we eat at the wrong times or when we’re not actually hungry, and when we eat with impatience or without respect or restraint.<sup>4</sup> The definition of gluttony is broadened to include what today we might call a restaurant fetish.

Confronted with gluttony as an excess and extravagance, controlling it became paramount. For late medieval theologians, controlling inordinate desire through fasting was a step toward individual perfection and therefore salvation. In fact, the discomfort of suffering procured for Christians a deeper understanding of the nature of suffering that brought them closer to Jesus. The “pain of fasting reminds [human beings] of their nature and the choices that must be made if they are to come not only to the fullness of their nature but to the happiness promised them by their Creator. Second, one’s pain and suffering lose their seeming futility as they are united to the pain and suffering of Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Gluttony and its antidote in the form of fasting are no longer considered in terms of equitable living or their impact on the social fabric but are considered simply as vice and virtue on the way toward spiritual perfection. The concern for individual salvation—not health, but salvation—replaces the ethical, communal issues at stake in the human being’s relationship to food.

In Luther’s commentary on the Fourth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism, he writes, “What

then does 'daily bread' mean? Answer: Everything included in the necessities and nourishment for our bodies, such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, farm, fields, livestock, money, property, an upright spouse, upright children, upright members of the household, upright and faithful rulers, good government, good weather, peace, health, decency, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like."<sup>6</sup> As we think about preaching, there is no better place to start than with this simple but profound catechetical statement.<sup>7</sup> In the Catechism, food is clearly more than just nourishment for the body. It entails the health of the whole society. The distribution of daily food for all is equated to living in peace, with good government and faithful neighbors. Food is not used simply reduced to issues of an individual agenda.

Unfortunately, as Luther notes in the preface to the Smalcald Articles, society is far from such peaceable living and honorable relationships. With just a slight tweak in the details, we can recognize our own culture in the depiction he gives of the world around him: "There is disunity among the princes and the estates. Greed and usury have burst in like a great flood and have attained a semblance of legality. Wantonness, lewdness, extravagant dress, gluttony, gambling, conspicuous consumption with all kinds of vice and wickedness, [and] disobedience... have so gained the upper hand that a person could not set things right again with ten councils and twenty imperial diets." Gluttony is a mark of a society that has turned in upon itself.

Luther follows Thomas, knowingly or unknowingly, in providing a much broader definition of gluttony. Gluttony is more than simply overconsumption leading to obesity or other eating disorders. Gluttony is a mark of a society that values its own comfort, demands its own rights, and seeks its own satisfaction and privilege above that of the neighbor or wider community. Luther's sermon on "Soberness and Moderation against Gluttony and Drunkenness"<sup>8</sup> further underlines this

point. It serves as a powerful example of preaching on a subject that too many pastors today will avoid on the grounds that it inappropriately hounds people toward moral perfection. So how can a Lutheran pastor preach without falling into admonishments, harassing into moral improvement, and shoulds and should nots?

Luther's sermon begins with a scathing analysis of what was happening in the sixteenth century:

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"Germany is a land of hogs and a filthy people which debauches its body and its life. If you were going to paint it, you would have to paint a pig."<sup>9</sup> This is followed by a long and colorful description of the woes of overeating and overdrinking in Germany. But then, halfway through, a shift in focus occurs. After the critique comes proclamation. The gospel is not simply stating that Jesus Christ died for your sins. Luther wants to flesh out what this gospel means in concrete, specific terms. The text reads: "Above all, maintain constant love for one another" (1 Peter 4:8); the gospel comes to us in these

simple words, "above all." The passage is important enough to cite in its entirety.

Above all. This could well be a sermon in itself. You have been called to love one another. People today, peasants, citizens, and nobles, go on living in hatred and envy, so that none will give another even a piece of bread; they will commit any kind of rascality so long as they can deny it. If you want to be saved, you must possess the red dress which is here described. You have put on the vestment. You are white as snow [Isaiah 1:18], pure from all sins. But you must wear this red dress and color now, and remember to love your neighbor. Moreover, it should be a fervent love, not a pale-red love, not the love which is easily provoked to revenge [1 Corinthians 13:5]. It should be a strong color, a brown-red love, which is capable not only of doing good toward your neighbor but is also able to bear all malice from him [1 Corinthians 13:4, 7]. For this is the way sins are covered, even a multitude, a heap, a sea, a forest of sins.

Christ has saved us. Christ has made us white as snow, pure from all sins. As new creatures, we now go out and love our neighbor. The implication is profound. When gluttony and drunkenness are rampant, we are only loving ourselves. Yet the new life given to us is a life continually directed toward the neighbor. The problem with gluttony is that it isolates a person from the neighbor and more than that destroys the very fabric of community. Luther goes on to state that, in the Christian community, we are not to hurt one another in this way. All members of the body are to work together.

Gluttony separates a person from the community, from the real fellowship. Moderation, on the other hand, is an expression and strengthening of community. This simple truth is evi-

denced every Sunday, at the heart of Christian worship and proclamation, when the community gathers around a meal. The sacrament of holy communion signifies for us the forgiveness of sins. This forgiveness does not only reestablish or renew the relationship between Jesus and me but also embeds me in the whole community, a reconciled body. In his early treatise on the sacrament, Luther writes that the significance of this sacrament is a real fellowship.<sup>10</sup>

This fellowship is created and renewed by God's word given to us. It is the body of Christ that establishes this fellowship, this *communio*. And the sign of this fellowship is food! Bread and wine are distributed for all. There is enough to go around. No one gets more than the next person, contrary to what was happening in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11). The food is simple, not extravagant; it comes from the earth and human labor but is not overly processed. The sign itself is a radical indication of what the human relationship to food is meant to be.

Perhaps this is best illustrated in a comparison of Scripture texts. In Genesis 3, where food—an apple, as we usually imagine—provokes illicit longing for self-satisfaction, our first parents reach out and take the fruit and eat it. In reconciliation, in the new creation, our relationship to food is rendered “just” once again. Now we do not pluck the fruit from the tree; rather, God gives us food. Now we only stretch out empty hands and God fills them. We receive rather than take. We rejoice in thanksgiving rather than hide to protect our own interests.

Today we have lost once again this simple, just relationship to food and community. We utilize millions of acres of land to produce tons of genetically modified corn that has zero

nutritional value and is only used to sweeten soft drinks and countless other products. In the meantime, so many in the world go hungry and even starve to death.<sup>11</sup> Gluttony is rampant in this unhealthy relationship to creation and the neighbor.

I have already mentioned a number of Scripture texts relating to food and gluttony. Many of these texts are found in the Revised Common Lectionary in any given year. There are, though, many other Scripture texts on food that should be noted. A resource that is incredibly helpful in this regard is Gail Ramshaw's *Treasures Old and New*.<sup>12</sup> This resource develops forty key images in Scripture that surface in the RCL. Primary images that appear in the lectionary are food, fish, and harvest. Others images direct us to the many ways we can think about introducing the topic of food and our right relationship to it, such as banquet, barley, Bethlehem (the “house of bread”), fast, feast, bread, wine, and so on.

The summer of Year B takes us through all the bread-of-life discourses in the Gospel of John. As we enter into the fall of Year B, we discover the cup of salvation (Psalm 116), food and cup linked to the cross and resurrection, and the story of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17) proclaiming that even in small amounts there will be enough. There are abundant Scripture passages that link food, harvest, cup, or water with God, covenant, blessing, the poor, the cross, and life itself.

All of these Scripture texts can be used to preach in such a way that people's true need will be revealed so that they will come and even compel pastors to administer the sacrament.<sup>13</sup> We are all invited come to the true feast.

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#### Notes

1. Available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/23/portion-sizes-infographic\\_n\\_1539804.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/23/portion-sizes-infographic_n_1539804.html) (accessed July 15, 2012).
2. Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, trans. Richard Regan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), Q. XIV, Art. 1.
3. Stephen Loughlin, “Thomas Aquinas and the Importance of Fasting to the Christian Life,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17 (2008): 353.
4. Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, Q. XIV, Art. 3. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, 148, 5 and *On Evil*, XIV.3.
5. Loughlin, 356.
6. Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter cited as BC], 357.
7. On a practical note, it is also helpful to indicate to the congregation that you are citing from the Small Catechism so that the faithful are continually reminded of its existence. If you are in a congregation that uses *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, you can even have them turn to page 1164 at the back of the book.
8. Martin Luther, “Soberness and Moderation against Gluttony and Drunkenness,” in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.) [hereafter cited as LW], 51:291–9. Luther preached this sermon on May 18, 1539, on the text of 1 Peter 4:7–11.
9. LW 51:292.
10. “The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ and the Brotherhoods,” LW 35:51.
11. A provocative documentary analyzes the disastrous relationship that North Americans have with corn: *King Corn*, released in October 2007, directed by Aaron Woolf.
12. Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002).
13. BC 350.

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