

# A Hungry People

*The season and the Lectionary offer great bounty*

By MELISSA MUSICK NUSSBAUM

August is the month of ripe fruit, on our tables and in the Lectionary. Tomatoes, red and yellow and purple, smelling of the stalks from which they were plucked; watermelons so ripe they split open with the first thrust of the butcher knife; peaches that release their river of juices with each bite, juices that run down your chin and cover your fingers in nectar.

My mother always made homemade peach ice cream in August. The peach slices, partially frozen in the churning cream, offered resistance with each bite. The ice cream would come after a meal that usually offered those other summer dishes: fresh tomatoes, sliced and unadorned save for a sprinkling of salt, and fried okra. It doesn't get hot enough long enough in Colorado for okra, so, after my mother joined us here, she would devote part of every August to scouring the farmers' markets looking for tender okra. (And anyone driving up from the south would be instructed to bring several pounds of okra along). She didn't want the woody pods, but the small, pliable ones. Two to three inches long is just right. Anything longer is tough. Break open a fresh okra pod, and the seeds and gluey juice pop out. Slice it, dust it with yellow cornmeal and salt, and fry it in bacon fat, and okra's tender interior is wed with a light crust, tasting of salt and bacon and hot Texas days. Forget the cakey fried nuggets you've eaten in diners and cafeterias. They use frozen okra and fry it in a batter. The way my mother made it was less a fry than a caress.

The August Sunday Lectionary is filled with food. We begin with the hungry Israelites, grumbling in the desert about the groceries they left behind in Egypt. I can imagine them remembering whatever is the Egyptian equivalent of homemade peach ice cream and fresh, fried okra. We know African slaves brought okra to this land, a gift we may not deserve,



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but for which I am grateful. I wonder if any Jewish slaves, leaving Egypt, thought to bring seeds or recipes with them. It would have been of no use. For an entire generation they were in the desert, dependent on God alone for food, for "their daily portion."

On that same Sunday, we hear Jesus talking about food, "the food that endures for eternal life." He is talking about himself, the "Bread of God," that "which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." Jesus knows that we are hungry people. He offers himself to us like an August harvest, produce so rich and full that we have enough and more than enough and plenty to share. He speaks of this bread in the way that I think of an August tomato vine bowed down with fruit, a fruit that blossoms and matures faster than we can eat it. Our hunger is never greater than his bounty.

The next Sunday we meet the prophet Elijah starving in the desert. He sits down and prays for death. Death would be better than this hunger. But an angel brings him "a hearth cake and a jug of water." I can only imagine "hearth cake" as a hot pan of cornbread — no sugar —

baked in a heavy iron pan. I have my mother's black pan, each indentation for the batter made to look like an ear of sweet corn. She put the pan in a hot oven. When the pan was hot, she spooned in a little bacon fat. When the fat began to sizzle and spit, she spooned in the batter. The scripture says Elijah "was strengthened by my food," and, if it was cornbread, I know why. The church pairs this reading with another from Jesus talking about himself as "the bread come down from heaven." Then the bounty grows, swells, expands; Jesus says that we who eat "the bread come down from heaven ... may eat it and not die." Our hunger is never greater than his bounty, but this is a crop we cannot ever fully comprehend, though we may receive it, filling our empty baskets with life.

On the next Sunday we hear that even Wisdom feeds us. She offers us "my food" and "the wine I have mixed." The talk of wine leads us into the Gospel and talk of Jesus' blood, his body and blood. He loses people here, as well he might. They agree, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?"

Jesus invites us to feed on him. "Unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you." He doubles down, "For my flesh is true food, and my body is true drink."

My favorite question in the discourse, not included in the Lectionary, comes from listeners who ask, "Is this not the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother?" It might be translated: "We're supposed to eat the neighbor boy?"

Yes. Yes, we are supposed to feed upon the body and blood of Christ as a baby feeds at his mother's breast. With delight, in peace. For we are a hungry people, but our hunger is never greater than Christ's bounty.

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