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Thinking of food with 'astonished gratitude about abundance'

Bill Tammeus | Mar. 23, 2011 A small c catholic

Last June in this space I wrote about a Creighton University student?s intriguing project [1] in which he tried to apply Catholic social teaching to the production, distribution and consumption of food.

I recall thinking then that in some ways Catholics seem more sensitive to this matter than do most of the Protestants I hang around with. For Protestants to get more interested in this, I thought, they need a way to root concern for food issues in the Bible.

As predestination would have it (that?s a small Presbyterian joke), I recently heard the top-cabin Protestant biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann [2] give a workshop about how the Bible teaches us to think about food.

On the chance that not all of us have put our concerns about food within a biblical context, I?ll pass along some of what Brueggemann had to say. First, of course, he told us it was important ?to make the leap from ancient texts to the practice of contemporary faith.?

That, in turn, means it?s necessary to know how the Bible was put together and what it means to draw meaning out of it for today. (For help with that task, I recommend two excellent new books, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible [3]*, by Timothy Beal, and *Bible Babel [4]*, by Kristin Swenson. The latter is particularly useful for people whose biblical knowledge is quite limited.)

?The Bible,? Brueggemann told us, ?is endlessly interested in the problem of food. It takes bread as a concrete substance in our life that we have to have to live and it also takes bread as a metaphor for the gifts of the gospel. And we wind up with Jesus saying, ?I am the bread of life.?

?What food does is to remind us that biblical faith is materialistic and incarnational and is basically concerned with our bodily lives and how we create a body politic together. The church is always tempted, it seems to me, to fly off into spirituality. Spirituality is a good thing if it?s kept connected to real life in the world. But I think the Bible really is quite materialistic.?

Another obvious reason to talk about food, he said, ?is that world hunger is a huge problem. Statistically and demographically we?re in huge trouble about food in the world.? Brueggemann suggested the best way to understand these issues is to read *Exodus from Hunger [5]* by David Beckman of Bread for the World [6].

When Brueggemann, whose work has focused on the Hebrew Scriptures, tries to get Christians to understand an issue such as food, he takes them back to wonderfully illustrative Bible stories. On this day he raised up stories of King Solomon as an example of a powerful accumulator of material goods, but someone who was endlessly worried about having enough, especially when dreams of famine troubled his sleep.

Solomon thus represents ?accumulation toward monopoly.? But the other approach to food -- the one recommended for people of faith -- is what Brueggemann called ?astonished gratitude about abundance.?

These two approaches can be found in the Bible and can guide us in our own thinking about food and food policy. Indeed, if we adopt an attitude of ?astonished gratitude about abundance,? I think we can easily wind up with a view of food?s production, distribution and consumption that is in deep harmony with Catholic social teaching.

In fact, we need not limit our astonishment at abundance in the world to food. It?s also easily applicable to many other resources and to wealth generally. But when we adopt a Solomon-like attitude of accumulation and monopoly (and isn?t that the core message of American culture?) we move away from biblical principles that should guide all Christians.

What I had trouble getting my head around at the workshop, however, was a table piled with yummy desserts. But maybe that was to create enough guilt to move us to action.

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